

My
Friend's
Little
Sister

Has It
IN
For
Me!

4
vol.

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari



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Characters



Ooboshi Akiteru

The protagonist. Second year. He is determined to dedicate his teenage years to absolute efficiency, and has only a single friend in light of that ideal. Though he claims to be as average as they come, he is actually the director of the 05th Floor Alliance. He never misses his efficient daily workout.



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Ozuma's younger sister. At school, she plays the part of a cheerful, kind, and perfectly-behaved honor student, but in reality she likes to pester Akiteru persistently. A highly talented actress, she does the voices for the 05th Floor Alliance. Rumor has it that she turns into a tireless machine when she has some energy drink in her system.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's classmate and younger cousin. She's playing the part of Akiteru's girlfriend. After confessing to him, she's now on the offensive. Her secret identity is that of best-selling author Makigai Namako. Her editor Canary has asked her to start working out. Mashiro is ignoring her.



Kohinata Ozuma

A handsome second year, he's Akiteru's only friend. He has absolute trust in Akiteru and is an all around great guy, but he's been showing a darker sense of humor lately. He is the 05th Floor Alliance's genius programmer. Lately, he's been going on about wanting to turn every flight of stairs in the world into escalators.



Kageishi Sumire

Akiteru's homeroom teacher, she's feared as the "Venomous Queen." In truth, she's Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, a skilled artist who can't keep to a deadline. Twenty-five years old, her open-mindedness knows no bounds; she'll ship straight, yaoi, and yuri pairings, and even accept either member as the top or bottom. Loves alcohol. Rarely exercises. Has a beer after.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary—well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. Despite all that, there I was—Ooboshi Akiteru, epitome of efficiency—with this girl who kept sneaking into my apartment.

Kohinata Iroha. She wasn't my sister, she wasn't my friend, and she *definitely* wasn't my girlfriend. She was nothing more than my friend's little sister.

She was annoying and a bother, and had one secret she held close to her heart: she was a hidden member of the 05th Floor Alliance, a team of developers behind a popular mobage who were shrouded in mystery.

I was the group's producer. OZ, real name Kohinata Ozuma, was its brilliant programmer. The illustrator was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, real name Kageishi Sumire, and our scenario writer was Makigai Namako, a best-selling light novel author who decided to join us for whatever reason. We made up the group's core of four.

Our game, *Koyagi: When They Cry*, filled a niche in the market by being a horror game which also featured charming characters. It became widely popular, attracting a huge number of players.

The team was filled with talents who all had to give up on their dreams for one reason or another. My uncle Tsukinomori-san was the CEO of Honeyplace Works, a huge entertainment enterprise, and I decided to use that connection to get the Alliance members a job there. He promised to accept them on one condition: that I pretended to be his daughter Mashiro's boyfriend until graduation. At the same time, I wasn't allowed to get serious about her or anyone else.

I'd always considered romance and stuff like that a distraction from my real goal, so I didn't think much of accepting his condition. But then Mashiro confessed to me for real, and Sumire got me caught up in her family's affairs. It was the kinda stuff I thought only happened in romantic comedies.

While all that was going on, Sumire decided to quit being a teacher so she could be a full-time illustrator. For that, she needed to find the Kageishi family head's weakness as ammo to revolt against him. Of course, the Alliance and I were there to help too.

Consequently, Iroha (disguised as Sumire) and I were currently undergoing the Kageishi Village's Ceremony of Knots, a traditional event that boasted a one hundred percent marriage rate—something so bizarre that it could only have been thought up by an author running on precisely zero hours of sleep.

We had both scoffed at the idea. It was utterly unscientific, after all. But then...

“What is this, a love hotel?”

The shrine where the ceremony was to take place was a love hotel no matter how you sliced it, whether sideways, diagonally, or in an awkward zig-zag pattern.

...So now what?

Prologue

It was morning. Birds were chirping. I rubbed my eyes and sat up, my mind hazy. This wasn't my bed, and that ceiling wasn't mine, and it was cold. But then, anyone would be cold in their birthday suit. I could hear someone sleeping soundly beside me. I turned to look.

It was my friend's little sister. I'd never seen her *like that* before though.

Oh yeah...

Kohinata Iroha (that's her name) and I got holed up in this love hotel/shrine hybrid last night, and we...

We spent the night together, tempted by the wicked thoughts that a summer night like that one could bring. Now that things had ended up like this, there was nothing else for it. I had to take responsibility and accept Iroha as my wife. We'd spend the rest of our lives together, and I'd do everything I could to make her happy.

"Quit it, Ozu. You're the programmer, not the scenario writer."

"I'm just givin' the people what they want! At least lemme pretend you guys are gonna get your happily ever after, even if it's just for a second."

"You can't just skip right to the morning either. There's this little thing called *pacing*."

"You tell it then. I bet the real thing is just as exciting as my version, right?"

"Hardly."

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that men tease the girls they are interested in.

I have no idea who came up with that and decided it was now a fact, but it's never been true for me.

Strategically speaking, if you really want to fight efficiently on the battlefield of love, being needlessly unkind to the target of your affections is nonsensical. People who are purposefully mean or cold towards their crush only exist in light novels and anime. In reality, it's obvious when a girl is into you. She'll smile sweetly and be openly affectionate with you.

That was what I always believed, anyway. But if that was true, I had a problem. A big one.

“What if I said I wanted to let the magic of the ceremony take over?”

We were deep in the mountains of Kageishi Village. The night was still; not even the insects were buzzing. Iroha and I were right in the middle of this ceremony which boasted a hundred percent success rate of marriage. Believable only if you were a student council secretary with an IQ of three.

The venue for this ceremony was an honorable and traditional shrine slathered unceremoniously with pink to give it the air of a love shrine (a love shrine being a shrine made up to look like a love hotel, of course). We were there together, just the two of us.

Iroha's tone was sweet as she asked me that question. Her eyes had a tender sheen to them as they searched mine for an answer, and her cheeks were slightly pink. There was none of the usual annoyingness in her actions. Nor was there any contempt in her gaze, like the type you might get when attempting to pet a cute-looking chihuahua without its permission. Her shoulders were hunched a little, as though she feared my answer, and her expression had the vulnerability of an innocent maiden.

The way she looked at me, and the nature of her question... Was she saying she liked me?

But she was Kohinata Iroha, my friend's little sister. I should know better than to underestimate her. It was always the same story. She'd act all innocent and sweet, and the next thing I knew she'd say, “Just kidding!”

Go on then. Say it. Please.

I felt like the only way things would be okay was if she suddenly burst out laughing and told me it was all a joke after all.

How long was she planning on waiting?

There were no clocks in here. The only clue that time was still passing was the heavy thumping of my heart.

I waited.

And waited.

Yet that sweet expression never left her face, and the devilish grin I was hoping for never came.

What if she was planning to keep this up? What if time stopped right now, and I never answered her question?

Everything I knew about romance was telling me that her words and her expression meant she really had feelings for me. What if that were true?

You know what? That was irrelevant right now.

How did *I* feel? How *should* I, Ooboshi Akiteru, feel here, hearing her true feelings in the midst of this magical pink atmosphere?

What was the right answer?

“Gooooooooooooooooal!”

“C’mon. I haven’t finished yet.”

Chapter 1: My Friend's Little Sister Knows Me Too Well!

The soft cushions of the bed were pressed against my back, while my chest with its hammering heart and panting lungs was pressed against Iroha's. Our combined heartbeats drummed loudly in my head, a rhythm so heavy I couldn't work out whose was whose anymore. There was the sound of a ribbon sliding undone through hair. Without her hair tied back, Iroha seemed even more vulnerable than before. It was a declaration that she had made up her mind.

I felt my body heating up. I tilted my head slightly to look at Iroha's face by my neck; it was red, and her eyes were unfocused as they met mine, as though she were intoxicated.

What's with her eyes? The heck is even going on?!

It was like a game of Cheat. She had laid down two cards. One said "I love you," the other "I was kidding." I just had to pick the one that was true to win. Pick the wrong one, and it was game over. Right now, Iroha was telling me the "I love you" card was the correct choice. Now, what would happen if I were to take her at face value and answer honestly?

"Just kiddin'! It was all a ruse! I bet your heart's poundin', huh? Ha ha ha!"

Not only was I in for a world of nuisance, but she'd be ragging on about it for the next month *at least*. Guaranteed.

But that assumed she *was* kidding. What if she wasn't?

If I was any sort of man, I should probably give her a straight answer. That was true even if she wasn't serious. It'd be embarrassing once she started teasing me for sure, but all of that shame would fall on me and me alone, so what was the problem aside from me getting majorly pissed off? That just meant I'd owed her, say, sixteen strikes of her pressure points later.

I thought back to when I barged into Iroha's room to apologize to her. I'd upset her by letting Mashiro's confession throw me off so much that I had stopped working in the best interests of the 05th Floor Alliance. I had reaffirmed to her then and there that I would sacrifice my teenage years to direct her and to create an environment for the Alliance members to thrive. If I was to keep my promise to her, I couldn't let myself get carried away here. That was regardless of how she felt; I couldn't let frivolous youth distract me again.

No matter how tempted I'd been in the past, there was always a calm part of me that allowed me to see the situation objectively and that pulled me back to sensible ground. It was all for the promise I'd made to Ozu, Iroha, and Sumire. But the only reason that part of me existed was because I wasn't in love with anybody. By the same token, nobody had ever shown serious romantic interest in me either. If either of those precedents failed, there was no guarantee that my rock-solid reasoning would see me through. These were uncharted waters.

What do you mean, "that's wordy and confusing"? Fine, let me drop the deductions and put it a little more simply.

I might be in love with Iroha.

With the way the blood was pumping through my body right now, I was really starting to believe in that possibility. And if that were true, then it mattered even less how Iroha felt. No matter how *she* felt, I had my own feelings I needed to sort through.

If I was in love with Iroha...what should I do?

"No!"

"Huh?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and gently pushed Iroha away from me. Even the soft arms I had to touch to get her off me seemed to fizzle against my skin, but touching her there was way better than letting myself get carried away by the tempting mood of this place.

"Lemme be clear! I don't wanna be trapped alone with you in an overbearingly indecent place like this!"

"O-Oh."

At first, Iroha looked shocked. Her expression slowly crumbled as the full weight of my words hit her.

I continued, resisting the raging urge to hold her and push her down further on the bed. "D-Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you're not attractive. In fact, I really just want to hold you tight right now and... Well, what I mean is, staying like this isn't a good idea."

"R-Right."

"Wait, did I say 'I'?! I didn't mean me specifically! I'm talking about the average Japanese teenager!" I quickly corrected myself.

Iroha looked a little embarrassed. Maybe suggesting I wanted to hold her tight was a bit much.

"H-Huh. So you think I'm cute to the average Japanese guy?"

"Y-Yeah. Generally speaking, I mean."

"So what you're saying is, my cuteness is a gift to society?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"But are you saying it's the kind of cuteness that can be defined by political theory?"

"No. And stop pretending you know about stuff like that."

"Heh heh! It's okay, I got it. I didn't realize you loved me that

much, though. Well, I guess anyone would, seeing as my cuteness is practically a key pillar of public infrastructure.”

“You hit your head or something?”

While her tone was as annoying as usual, there was something incredibly odd about her word choice. I guess it probably wouldn’t seem as confusing to me if I were as smart as Iroha, what with her being the top student in her grade.

Given the way she was speaking now, though, would I be right to assume her question from earlier was just her usual bullying?

Yeah. It’s gotta be.

I mean, sure, her eyes were darting around all over the place, but...

“Wait. Are you...embarrassed?”

“Huh?! What the heck are you saying, Senpai? Seriously?! Nah, I’m just self-conscious, y’know!”

“Really? Hm. If you say so.”

Iroha was acting weird. There was no way she’d admit to something like that normally. Somehow, her confusion was allowing me to see things more objectively and calm down a little. My heart was still pounding, but I was able to reorder my thoughts.

“To be honest, there was a split second where I thought I wouldn’t mind carrying on.”

“Senpai... Does that mean you...”

“But we can’t. We *can’t*.”

I was just inexperienced. That was why I let Iroha’s femininity get the better of me. My healthy male hormones had reared their ugly head. Usually, I suppressed them with logical and rational thinking, but this time I’d let it slip. That was all this was. Regardless of how I might or might not have felt about Iroha.

“I need to keep my promise to Tsukinomori-san, or the Alliance won’t be able to work at Honeyplace Works. I’m Mashiro’s boyfriend until she graduates, so I can’t do anything reckless with you here. I also promised you that I would do everything I could for the Alliance.”

Thinking about it, there was nothing else I could have said. I had to dedicate all my efforts to my goal, ignoring stuff like romantic affairs that came as part and parcel of being young. It was for Ozu’s sake, for Iroha’s sake, for Sumire’s sake...but most of all for my own sake.

It was the exact same reason I’d rejected Mashiro just a short while ago. It’d be disrespectful to let myself get carried away here after she gathered up every last drop of courage to confess to me. I’d set the protocol, and it was time for me to follow it, as though I were nothing more than a robot. There was just one thing that was different

about this situation, though.

“You’re cute. I mean, anybody’d get turned on and want to take things further if they found themselves locked away in a place like this with a cute girl like you. But some things are a hundred times more important than a split second of desire.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, I getchu!”

“I’m aware that’s probably one of the worst things a guy can ever say to a girl.”

“It sure is. You don’t understand girls at all, so you can go die in a fire! I bet that’s what Mashiro-senpai’d say if she were here.”

“She says that almost every day to me...”

“Aha ha ha! Anyway, I get it. You’re prioritizing your promise to me. That’s commendable.”

“I dunno how I feel about you patting my head like that.”

“It must feel like I’m your mom or something, right? They say men who work hard like this kinda age-play.”

“Thanks for the trivia lesson. Or not.”

The warmth from Iroha’s hand actually felt good against my head, and I could understand why some people would just want to give in to it. Iroha kept stroking my head tenderly before bringing her lips to my ear.

“You’re so helpless, Senpai. But then, I like that about you.” She let out a hearty laugh.

That annoying laugh should have been a sign that she was back to normal, but it somehow sounded different than usual. She had admitted to “liking” something about me so easily. The feeling that she probably wasn’t being serious sat heavy at the pit of my stomach. But to put it in flowery terms, it made my heart skip a beat. I couldn’t work out why; nothing else she’d ever done or said had made me feel this way. Could it be that I— No, it was way too early to come to that conclusion.

I know I brought up the possibility of me liking Iroha, but it wasn’t like I’d sufficiently proved it. And if it turned out that I did, I’d feel absolutely terrible for Mashiro.

I mean, think about it. While it was true that my heart had been pounding this entire time, it wasn’t like romantic situations were the only stimulus to cause an elevated heart rate. Anybody’s heart would be pounding this hard if they went on Japan’s highest and fastest roller coaster, or if they went through a haunted house with really skilled actors in it. If that feeling was a romantic one, then amusement parks would quickly become watering holes for those looking for a one-night stand.

And what if you were out alone on a midnight stroll and happened upon an old man in a morphsuit? Your heart would be

racing then. It was an instinctual thing for creatures exposed to danger, and that was all it was. I don't even wanna go into what would happen if *those* feelings were considered romantic.

"D-Don't tease me right now, okay? Not when we're...somewhere like this."

"Ha ha! I got you nervous!"

"I-Iroha!"

"What? I wanna see you getting all flustered sometimes. It's cute. What's the harm?" Iroha stuck her tongue out at me.

I hated the way the air seemed to shimmer around her with each annoying action. There had to be something wrong with me. "Look, just quit it. Let's just sleep and get this night over with, okay?"

"Whatever you say, captain." Iroha pulled away from me with a pout before perching on the side of the bed and idly swinging her bare legs.

I let out a sigh of relief. Our first night spent alone together was going to be nice and uneventful. Words couldn't describe my utter relief.

"You look totally awake," I pointed out.

"It's not like I'm gonna be able to roll over and fall asleep in a situation like this. I feel super alert. Why don't you take responsibility for keeping me up and do something entertaining?"

"Be reasonable. That's not in my skill set. You're talkin' like I'm some young actor who just got his first TV break."

We were starting to settle back into our usual nonsense. My heart throbbed at the natural scent coming off Iroha each time she so much as twitched, but it was still a ton more bearable than the heavy stuff that went on before. We sat up next to each other and began to speak, the words coming more naturally and calmly than before.

"By the way, Senpai. There's something I've been wondering about the Alliance and Sumire-chan-sensei."

"Huh. Rare for you to think so deeply about stuff. What is it?"

"I know it was you who seduced everyone into joining the Alliance in the first place—"

"You mean 'persuaded.' Stop making me sound like a total creep."

"—buuut I realized I'm the only one who doesn't know what promise you actually made with them. I know roughly what you said. Like, with Sumire-chan-sensei, you're gonna make it so she can be an illustrator at Honeyplace Works and not a teacher, but what did you promise her that means she can just quit her teaching job like that?"

"Right. Yeah, I've been trying not to get into this serious stuff too much..."

The 05th Floor Alliance. A sand castle built on a shaky foundation. Makigai Namako-sensei aside, everybody in the group was

bearing a heavy burden. One that anyone outside the group probably couldn't even see. To each individual, though, it was a burden so great and fragile that a single misstep could cause it to all come crashing down. That's why I tried to keep any conversation with them light.

"I guess I can tell you about Sumire-sensei at this point, though. No matter the outcome, her problem's gonna reach its conclusion today."

"You mean she's gonna fix her family issues?"

"No. Her personal issues."

"What's the difference?"

"Well, what do you think is Sumire-sensei's biggest problem right now?"

Rather than complain how I answered a question with a question, Iroha began to think. She raised her head and answered smoothly, "She's a teacher who's into shotas!"

"Correct! But also, this is a serious discussion, so I'm gonna have to mark you down."

"Aww!"

"The answer is avoidance. She never faces her problems head-on; she just puts them off as much as she can."

"Ah, yes, her all-powerful talent. 'I only get serious once the deadline's passed!' Wait, you said you were being serious! Why're *you* cracking jokes now?"

"Listen. It's true that Sumire-sensei procrastinates like crazy, and we all get a good laugh out of it."

I imagined how everyone must be feeling right now, searching through the Kageishi residence. I felt my mouth curve into a small smile. It wasn't unreasonable for Iroha to think I might be kidding. If there was some kind of god watching our lives play out, even they might be mad that I was "joking" right now when I'd decided to be serious for the first time in a long while.

"There's more to it than that. Sumire-sensei's problem goes much deeper."

"I'm really struggling to take you seriously right now, Senpai!"

"What I mean is, she's the only one who thinks that everyone in her family *has* to be a teacher."

"What? But her family seems super strict! I mean, they were gonna make her wear this weird white dress thingamabob and go through this whole ceremony whatsit." Iroha held up her arms and let her sleeves hang. It would certainly look out of place in the modern world we knew. It was like a symbol of how steeped in tradition the Kageishi household really was.

"Just because the Kageishi *family* likes to follow its traditions doesn't mean Sumire-sensei has to."

“Uh...?”

“There’s nothing stopping her from simply being honest and ignoring her family’s wishes. Individual rights are highly valued in Japan these days. It’ll take more than a single family to take those away, no matter how far back they go.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! You know all this history and tradition and family stuff isn’t something you can just brush off, right?”

“We live in a laws-based country. The law is absolute here.”

“Your argument’s way too logical. I mean, it’s also true, but...um...”

Iroha’s mouth was opening and closing as though she couldn’t put her thoughts into words, but I knew what she wanted to say. Even if my argument made sense, it was difficult to accept on an emotional level; I already knew that even the most clear-cut logical ideas could be rejected, no matter how true they were.

“But that doesn’t mean Sumire-sensei will be able to accept that truth on the inside. I get that. I’m just saying what’s true in theory and in relation to the law.”

“So...?”

“That makes this a problem of emotions. Now, Sumire-sensei—well, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei too—they both like to run away from their problems out of fear. So what if we gave her a huge safety net to fall back on?”

“Oh! She’d feel way safer! Especially if that safety net was a job offer at one of the world’s biggest companies!”

“You got it. Drastic times call for drastic measures.”

All Sumire-sensei needed was a golden opportunity so rare she’d bet her life on it. This was the true nature of the near-unbreakable chains that bound her. A lethal habit of running away from her problems so severe, that she could only be pushed into making up her mind if a path was set clearly before her.

“So does that mean the reason you’re so strict on her deadlines is because...”

“I’m trying to help her curb her procrastination habit. To be honest, if she can fix that much, her problem’ll be solved even if she doesn’t accept the job at Honeyplace Works.”

“I get it! Finally, I’m gettin’ an answer after all these years!”

“Uh, the Alliance hasn’t been a thing for ‘all these years.’ Anyway, what are you talking about?”

“It’s about the updates for *Koyagi*. I mean, Sumire-chan-sensei always misses her deadlines, right? But then there haven’t been any delays in updating the game with new stuff. I always thought you were desperately picking up the pieces behind the scenes, but that’s

not it, right?”

“Oh, that? I always arranged the scheduling with the expectation that she’d miss her deadlines. I knew that changing her habits—the funny ones *and* the not so funny ones—would take time.”

I’d always written up the schedules with buffers. And then I put in buffers for those buffers. That way, I could help Sumire to fix her procrastination habit slowly while getting her accustomed to the hectic environment she’d be exposed to at Honeyplace Works.

“Whoa. You’ve got all this stuff planned out that I never even thought of.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“Y’know that’s...super impressive, or it’s like...your brain’s always one step behind everyone else.”

“You calling me a dumbass?”

“Don’t get grumbly with me! What I mean is that most people don’t have such a deep understanding of other people’s lives like that.”

“It’s not that impressive. It’s not like I’m doing it outta the kindness of my own heart either. It’s only because it benefits both of us.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If that’s all you’re in it for, then why are you trying to get her out of her teaching job?”

“Well, y’know. It’s, uh... If she becomes a full-time illustrator, it’ll be easier for her to get us the resources we need and stuff...”

“I still don’t see why she can’t keep teaching and drawing on the side. Making a real effort to fix her procrastination thing and setting her ‘free’ doesn’t sound like a super *efficient* use of your time to me.” Iroha grinned up at me smugly.

God, she was annoying. She was acting as though she was an authority on every thought that passed through my mind.

“You’re just way too nice, Senpai! And then today you decided to launch your plan to get Sumire-chan-sensei to solve her problem once and for all! What if it works? What then?”

“Then we celebrate, right? If it works, we’ll just call the speedrun a success.”

“What, you think I’m dumb? Even I’ve noticed, y’know.”

I clicked my tongue. I hated it when girls were perceptive.

“If Sumire-chan-sensei solves her problems today, then she won’t have a reason to join Honeyplace Works anymore. Because the Alliance knew about her secret, it was too risky for her to work with anyone else. If she gets to be a full-time illustrator, she really will be free. And I don’t see how that’d be beneficial to you, Senpai.”

“You always act like such an airhead. How come you only bring out the smarts when it suits you?”

I was aware of the contradiction she'd pointed out, and I had been for a long time. Aware, but pretending I wasn't. It was Makigai Namako-sensei's editor, Canary, who'd forced me to face the truth. I'd always wanted to help my companions, who were blessed with heaps of talent, but were unable to put it to good use because of the injustices of life. That was why I had started up the Alliance. It was the most efficient method to achieve my own selfish goal while helping them to achieve theirs.

But the moment a speck of altruism was thrown into the mix—the moment I decided I wanted to help my companions reach the peak of their abilities—there would come a time where that feeling and my original goal would clash.

“What’s more important to you, Senpai? Sumire-chan-sensei’s freedom or the Alliance?”

I stayed silent, surrounded by the soft, traditional scents of the shrine and the mismatched pink lighting that filled it. If the atmosphere could quit trying to turn things sensual, that would be great right about now.

“Don’t worry, Senpai, I already know. I know, because you’re a good guy.”

“Didn’t I tell you before that this country places a great deal of importance on an individual’s rights? That doesn’t just apply to Sumire-sensei and her family, but me as well. Sumire-sensei has the right to make whatever decision she wants, and *I* don’t have the right to refuse her.”

“Y’mean her decision comes first then?”

“No, my top priority is the Alliance. I’m always telling everyone not to assume I’m working in their best interests, right? But that doesn’t mean I’m working to sabotage them either.”

They shouldn’t expect a reward for their work, and nor should I expect a reward for “helping” them. If they kept their expectations low, it wouldn’t hurt if they were betrayed later on.

“Ugh, d’you really have to be all doom and gloom about it? Nobody likes a downer, y’know! Especially not girls!”

“Girls don’t like me anyway.”

“Mmh... Eep!”

“I’m not gonna change my mind even if you pout, so— Wait, ‘eep’?”

In the midst of her pouting, Iroha made a noise that sounded remarkably like a frog being run over. Had I ever heard a frog being run over? No, but I did have some degree of imagination.

“Iroha? What’s the matter?”

“N-Nothing.”

“Um, okay.”

Iroha's smile was stiff, and her eyes were darting around the room. The next second, her face turned pale.

"N-No... No way!"

"What?"

"No! No, no, it can't be true! It's gotta be hidden somewhere! Here, or here, or... R-Right! Maybe outside!" Iroha was rushing around the shrine and turning it inside-out as though searching for something. She looked even more desperate as she failed to find it and rushed outside, before returning a little while later.

"It's...not here..." She drooped her head, her face listless with despair. I could see the sweat pouring off her face like a waterfall. Her complexion changed from red to white to green to purple and back to red, like a traffic light that had totally malfunctioned.

Something weird was going on.

"You sick or something? Hey!"

"D-Don't touch me!"

"S-Sorry. You're just kinda freaking me out."

"I-It's not that I hate you or anything, Senpai! Um, but, uh..."

Iroha started to squirm and rub her thighs together seductively.

"Seriously now. What's gotten into you?"

For a while Iroha continued squirming as though she was having trouble expressing herself. But soon it was like she couldn't hold it in any longer, and she slowly opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry for ruining the serious atmosphere, but..."

"Hey, it's not like you to look like the whole world's ending. You gotta hold on to hope! Uh, the game ain't over till it's over, as they say..."

"Senpai!" Iroha looked up at me, her eyes filled with giant tears. You've seen those kinda shots in manga, right? Iroha sank to the floor, her next words wrought with desperation. "I need to pee. Badly."

She apologized for breaking the serious atmosphere, but that was quite a serious problem in itself.

"I've heard girls get the urge to pee whenever they're around the guy they like. If it's backed by science, even you'll accept it, right, Aki?"

"I'll pretend you never said that. That's really not the way I wanna find out someone's into me..."



Chapter 2: My Friend's Little Sister Needs to Pee!

The wind, tinged with the summer heat and humidity, rustled the mountain trees that night. Taking a single step out of the shrine exposed us to the whisperings of insects and beasts, warning us that nature was ready to close in on us if we dared go any further. It was just like switching maps in a video game.

Have you ever turned around too suddenly and seen the world behind you lag like it didn't have time to load in all its assets yet, as though you were in some kinda simulation? I get it quite a lot, but maybe it's just me.

Anyway, that weird science-fictiony aside has nothing to do with my story.

"S-Senpai? Are you still there?"

"Y-Yeah. I'm here."

Iroha was busy conducting her business while I stood a small distance away so we could still talk to each other. To be clear, the "business" part is a euphemism. But maybe I didn't need to make that clear.

She was going to the bathroom. There wasn't a bathroom inside the shrine, so she had to go outside. I know it's not really elegant to put it in such direct terms, but that's just how reality is, so you'll have to forgive me. Besides, "bathroom" is vague enough, right? You understand she wasn't going to a literal bathroom, don't you?

I'm starting to make it even worse now, aren't I?

Anyway, what the heck was with that shrine? You'd think if they put all that effort into making it look like a love hotel, they'd have the foresight to stick a bathroom in there. But maybe they hadn't played enough life sim games to think of it.

"Wh-What are you doing right now?" asked Iroha. "You're not gonna record me, are you?"

"I'm pondering the beauty of semantics."

"I'm being serious. What are you doing?"

Ugh. Why did she care? I was really trying my best not to make this weird, but she wasn't helping.

"J-Just don't do anything gross, okay? And don't listen!"

"I know. I can stand further away if you want."

"No!"

“Gah! At least stop shouting.”

At this rate she was going to attract the attention of a nearby bear or something.

“M-My bad! I just don’t wanna be alone in a super dark place like this! It’s got some real *Maji FEAR 1000%* vibes, so stay there, please!”

“Fine. Just hurry up.”

“I-I’ll try!”

She could be really demanding sometimes. I wasn’t allowed to listen, I wasn’t allowed to move away... Though, I wouldn’t wanna be left alone in a place like this either. But I was surprised to find that even a girl as shameless as Iroha got embarrassed at the thought of people hearing her pee. It was a new discovery; the only other times I’d known her to be so embarrassed was when she was being treated like a kid. Personally, I wasn’t in the habit of using psychological trauma as a form of bullying, though.

I wasn’t going to bully her, but thinking about Iroha getting embarrassed planted a strange thought in my head. What would happen if I pushed her? Embarrassed her even further?

It might have been the weird atmosphere from the love-hotel-shrine thingy, but even the thought of her just brushing me off like she normally would seemed oddly cute. So if I pushed her even further than that, would she give me an even cuter reaction?

Wait.

Wasn’t this *that* urge? The urge to be mean to the person you liked? That urge that I always believed was just an urban legend? Did this mean it really existed?

Hold up. I’m getting ahead of myself.

That was assuming I liked Iroha, which was a hypothesis I didn’t have a shred of evidence for. I’d always rejected romance as per my value system, which would therefore mean I didn’t like her.

I knew full well that it was dumb to even be thinking about this. But at least it meant I didn’t have the wherewithal to pay attention to the sound of Iroha peeing. Thinking about it, she wasn’t particularly logical for how smart she was. If she was so embarrassed by the sound, why not have me wait just a tiny bit further away? If some kind of horrific event *were* to happen, I—

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!”

See? She’d let out an ear-piercing scream just like that one.

Wait.

“Iroha?!”

“S-S-Senpai! C-Come here, quick! Look at this!”

“I’ll deal with any ghosts. I got a ton of those talismans from that shrine, remember?”

“It’s a pack of stray dogs!”

“We’re boned.”

I pushed past the thickets and rushed in the direction of Iroha’s scream. I found her cowering there on the ground. There were three stray dogs closing in on her.

I’m not an expert on dogs, but these definitely weren’t small breeds like a chihuahua or toy poodle. They were big, like pit bulls or Akitas. I mean, yeah, size isn’t everything and chihuahuas can be terrifying too, but that’s beside the point.

The real demons here were the Kageishi family for not thinking to build a freaking bathroom inside the shrine when there were wild dogs roaming about! They clearly only had one thing in mind when designing that thing, and it wasn’t the dangers in the area around it. I could only deduce that they had the mental age of a bunch of horny teenagers.

“This is bad,” I said. “Seriously bad. Wonder where these three dogs came from.”

“W-We’re screwed, right? They’re growling like a...like a pack of wild dogs!”

“They’re all pretty chonky too. They must be eating well for stray dogs.”

“Maybe because they eat the meat of people like us!”

“H-Hey, just chill, will you?”

The dogs jumped at Iroha’s sudden yell, and spread out in opposite directions like they were preparing to fight. They were displaying remarkable intelligence for such wild animals. That meant I needed to get my brain in gear too.

“Can you stand, Iroha?”

“Yup! I— Aah!” Iroha squeaked like she’d suddenly been electrocuted, and her attempt at standing ended with her falling back down to the ground. “Gnngh...”

Iroha grit her teeth as she cradled her ankle. The traditional sandals that came with her outfit slipped off, revealing a red swelling above her foot. She must have sprained it when the appearance of the dogs startled her into falling.

Running wasn’t an option. Our only choice was to shake the three dogs off somehow.

“That’s all we *can* do...”

I did some online research about problems you could encounter on a trip like this and how to solve them before we left. Disasters, boating accidents, shark attacks, stalling on the highway, and so on. My research included wild dog attacks too, of course, though I never thought I’d have to make use of that knowledge.

“Keep your eyes on the dogs, Iroha. Try and back yourself towards that tree nice and slowly. No need to stand up.”

“Kay!” Iroha followed my instructions without question, which was a relief.

When dogs attacked as a group, they often did so from multiple directions. If they looped behind you when you weren’t paying attention and attacked from your blind spot, it could be fatal. As long as Iroha was backed against a tree, they couldn’t attack her from behind.

Step one for dealing with wild dogs: if they’re in a group, make sure they can’t sneak behind you.

“I’m not into the childish weather forecasts, but... Hup!” I shook off my sandal and let it rip. Kinda like grade schoolers doing that game where they can (supposedly) predict the weather. It seemed to draw an arc in slow motion before landing right in the middle of the dogs. Switching on the flashlight on my phone, I tossed it in front of the loudest and biggest dog (likely the leader).

“Wh-Why’d you take your sandal off? You can’t run away now!”

“You can’t run anyway, right? That means our only option is to drive them away.”

“B-But you could’ve just left me and—”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“B-But you even threw your phone away! What are you even doing?!”

“I can come get it later. It’s not like we’ve got many options here. It’s the only way to create a barrier between us and them.”

“A barrier? With light? This isn’t some lame RPG, y’know! I mean, sure, I can bully you about this later, but we’re kinda in danger here!”

“I’m not messing around. There was an animal behaviorist online who said this is what you’re s’posed to do.”

You needed to make some sort of barrier between you and the dogs to distract them, and it didn’t matter if it was a physical or mental barrier. Needless to say, it was just a temporary measure.

Step two for dealing with wild dogs: put something between you and them.

The wild dogs stood still and stared at the sandal-cum-phone barrier, their fur raised warily. While they were busy doing that, I looked around the area and picked up a stick I spotted nearby. It was long and thick enough for my purposes, and I was able to get a good grip on it. I gave it a few practice swings. When I was confident it would work, a smile rose to my lips, and I prepared to throw.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to *fight* with that, Senpai?! Even in RPGs you only use sticks in the starting towns! You don’t think you’re gonna win using that, do you?” Her voice betrayed her anxiety, but she still couldn’t resist getting in a jab at me despite the situation.

“What? You don’t know?” I asked, turning back to Iroha. I raised

the cypress stick (I mean, yeah, it probably wasn't cypress, but whatever) up high. "Sticks are the strongest weapon in any shark movie."

"No one watches shark movies, dum-dum!"

"Shut the hell up! I gotta at least pretend I can win this! If I don't have the placebo effect on my side, I got nothing!"

"I thought you worshipped facts and logic?! Where's that gone now?!"

I knew I was stretching the definition of "placebo," but hey, I was desperate. Armed with my stick, I let out a roar and rushed the dog in front of me.

Step three for dealing with wild dogs: grab a stick or something, and good luck.

Sorry for being vague on that last one. If you really wanna know how to drive off wild dogs, look it up yourself, because I really don't know enough to explain it to you.

Anyway.

Long story short, I won against those dogs. I didn't even need to fight them; they were so frightened by my desperate roar that they ran away with an adorable whimper. I owe you one, mysterious internet animal behaviorist.

"Ha...ha! I won! I won!" I burst into hearty laughter.

"You wanna put your weapon down and get that creepy-ass smile off your face? Sorry, I shouldn't really be calling *that* a weapon."

"Sorry. Kinda high on adrenaline right now."

This was my first time being attacked by wild dogs in the mountains in the middle of the night, you understand. I wonder how many other teenagers in Japan can say they've been through the same thing.

"Oh, right. I need to ask you something important, Iroha."

"They didn't bite or scratch me, so I'm not about to get rabies."

"Did you finish peeing before they showed up?"

"So you're more worried about that than me getting hurt?"

"Well, it's a big deal, right?"

It was important to think about these things. It was bad timing, and if her bowel movements were messed up, she could get sick. It was the same principle as having to account for loading times in a speedrun.

"Sure it is, but so is being polite! You really need to work on your manners!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll work on them. So? Did you finish up?"

"I got so scared that I don't wanna pee anymore."

"Fair enough. Can you stand?"

"Uh... I'm thinking maybe not." Iroha laughed nervously and

pointed at her foot. She was still sitting on the ground. There was a small cut on her swollen ankle, as though she'd caught it on a sharp stone when she fell.

"You've got a bigger problem than just the pain here. Hold on a sec."

It needed disinfecting. I had Iroha sit on a nearby rock while I jogged back to the shrine. I searched for a first aid kit but couldn't find one, nor anything else that would act as a disinfectant. I tossed a hundred yen into the mini-fridge next to our bed to get out a bottle of water, picked up two towels (of which they'd provided an absurd amount), and hurried back to where Iroha waited.

"Glad you weren't eaten up by those dogs while I was gone."

"I probably shouldn't jinx it, but I bet I'd be dead if this were a horror movie."

"Yeah, but this is real life. Let me see your foot for a second."

"Huh? W-Wait! Waaaait!"

"Don't kick me, stupid!" I knelt in front of Iroha and rolled her gown up to her thighs. I then held down her legs so she'd stop kicking, her face red. "I'm not gonna do anything weird, okay? I'm just washing your wound."

"O-Oh, right. That's okay, then..."

She finally calmed down. She really was a handful.

"Tell me if it hurts, okay?"

"Okay. Just be gentle."

I poured the bottled water over her wound and gently dabbed at it with a damp towel. My mind couldn't help but wander just a little at the way her leg twitched in response. I shook it off, knowing this wasn't the time, and finished cleaning up the wound. I wrapped it up with another towel when the bleeding stopped.

"Okay, that's all I can do for now. But I wanna disinfect it soon, if I can. Just in case."

"How were you so good at that? Were you in the scouts?"

"It just makes sense to know some basic first aid for emergencies. I'm no doctor, but I read up on what you're supposed to do."

"You're so good at everything it's starting to get a little freaky."

"No, I'm not. If I was halfway decent, I'd be able to stop the bleeding better, and I don't even know if I totally cleaned it right. I know about as much about this as anyone else."

"Hey, it's weird enough that you know, like, the most basic stuff about *everything*, but I'm too tired to make fun of you for it."

Somehow that just annoyed me even more. Wasn't I normally the one supposed to point out how weird *she* was? And now she was trying to tell me I was weird for being too normal?

I dunno...

“Let’s stop wasting time now and get down this mountain,” I said.

“Huh? What, right now?”

“Yep. It’s too risky to leave that wound without disinfecting it.”

“U-Um, okay, but... Why are you standing like that?”

“Why d’you think? Get on.”

“Eep.”

I sent Ozu a quick LIME message to let him know we were coming down before bending my knees and presenting my back to Iroha, ready to give her a piggyback. I had to be careful. I’d rather face those wild dogs again than deal with an Iroha embarrassed from being treated like a kid too much.

“I know you hate this kinda stuff, but please just go along with it this time.”

“Hngh. Is that disinfectant really that important? Can’t I just rest up in the shrine?”

“No. Remember, you’re not just any kouhai to me; you’re my friend’s little sister. Ozu—my one best friend—trusts me with you, and you got hurt. I can’t do anything to risk your health further.”

“Hmph. Well, I guess I do know how much you feel obligated to my brother...”

It felt like she was getting mad at me again, but in a more subtle way. I never did understand girls and how their minds and moods seemed to change as often as the weather. Outside of the rainy season, that is.

“Stop whining and get on.”

“Ugh. Okay, okay! Just don’t bully me about it later, all right?”

“Unlike you, I’m not in the business of collecting as many details as I can to bully my target later. Maybe this should be a lesson to you that it’s not nice.”

“I know, I know... Ugh, this is way too humiliating!” Iroha put her hands tentatively on my shoulders. “Excuse me...” Those two words were the most decency she was capable of, I was sure. Anyway, she slowly shifted her weight onto me.

I could feel those devilish sacks of flesh against my back, her weight, and those devilish sacks of flesh against my back. I gritted my teeth and stood up. That wasn’t a typo, by the way. Sometimes you just gotta repeat the important things.

The unkempt, rocky path down the mountains was an absolute minefield. One wrong step, and we’d be sent sprawling. They clearly never expected anybody to make this journey in the dead of night. There were no lamps, and anything more than an occasional sliver of moonlight was blocked out by the mountainous area. It was under

those terrible conditions that I carried Iroha down the mountain on my back, relying on nothing more than my memory of our trek upward hours back. I'd passed her my phone so that she could illuminate the way.

I didn't know whether it was because of what had happened in the shrine or not, but compared to normal, I seemed extra aware of the softness of her thighs in my hands, and her chest against my back. I wouldn't usually let myself waver like this, but my body was overly sensitive (by a multiple of three thousand if I had to guess), and it was especially hard to use logic to stop a certain beast rearing its ugly head.

What was it that was troubling me exactly?

It was a widely accepted scientific fact among academics that the power balance between Iroha and me was governed by the law of conservation of mass. However, her reaction to being carried by me was way weaker than it should've been, considering how much I knew this coddling behavior humiliated her. Maybe she picked up on the fact I was struggling mentally thanks to the instincts she'd honed over years of teasing me relentlessly.

"Lemme look at your pics, 'kay? Thanks!" she said, without waiting for an answer. "I bet you're hidin' some real gross stuff in here! Forget betting, I just *know* it!"

She seemed to be having a whale of a time up there.

"You've got some nerve being annoying in a place like this. You know I can just shake you off whenever I want, right?"

"No way would you do that, though!"

"I'm gonna start coddling you in a minute!"

"No, you won't! You're too nice! You're not the kinda person to bully me when I'm all weak and injured!"

"Gnnngh!"

"It was *super* embarrassing when you carried me and treated me like a kid when we were back in town, but out here no one's gonna see us! Plus, since I'm injured, you gotta treat me nice! In other words, I can just sit back and enjoy the ride on my very own human taxi!"

"I think I'm being pretty considerate here, so it'd be nice if you could extend me the same grace."

"The Japanese girl who can say no! That's me!"

"You're *so* annoying! God, I'm gonna remember this, y'know."

"O-Ow! Your tongue's so sharp, I think my wound's gonna open up again!"

"Grrrrrrrrr!"

To think I was considering I might like her! Greatest mistake of my life. Legendary pain in the ass, thy name is Iroha. I wasn't going to forget this in a hurry.

“And while I’m nice and safe up here, I’m gonna take a peek at the tiddies in your image folders!”

“Ever heard of respecting someone’s privacy?!”

I could hear her breathing heavily in my ear as she tapped away at my phone. It was locked via facial recognition, but she got around that by leaning down and positioning my phone in front of me. No matter how fast technology was advancing, it still fell short when it came to anti-Iroha measures. I thought briefly about contacting customer support and complaining, but realized it was probably too extreme.

“Huh? Hey, there’s no porn here at all!”

“Yeah, because I’m a wholesome boy who’s too young for that sort of thing.”

“What the heck?! That’s so *boooring*! I thought you’d have some super wild kinks! Some brand-new, never-before-seen fap material for me to swipe through and dominate you with for months!”

“You need to put more thought into your word choice. Plus, using ‘brand-new’ and ‘never-before-seen’ in the same sentence is redundant. The literary masters of old are probably spinning in their graves right about now.”

Of course, if I was as dirty-minded as Sumire, I’d probably be hailing her use of “dominate” as creative, but I wasn’t, and who cares anyway?

There was nothing even close to the sort of material Iroha was looking for on my phone. Since I knew she was liable to get in there at any time, I’d be a moron to leave anything like that on there. You don’t even need to download stuff like that nowadays either. Type a few words into a search bar and away you go.

I could hear Iroha grumbling and muttering on my back. It sounded like she was convinced she’d find something if she kept digging, but I knew for a fact she wouldn’t. I’d used a tool made by Ozu, one which deleted all traces of anything sketchy. Because Ozu was such a master of engineering, I knew for sure he’d never let me install something incomplete or buggy. I had full faith in the program. If it did miss anything, that just meant his magic was wearing off, which also meant...

“Oooh. This photo...”

“He’s lost his virginity?!”

“What the heck, Senpai?! What are you talking about?”

“S-Sorry. A thought just struck me. Sorta.”

There was an old legend on the internet stating that if a guy kept his virginity, he’d be able to use magical powers. But I couldn’t be bothered to explain that to Iroha now.

“Sounds kinda sus! But whatever. What’s this photo from?”

“Huh? Oh, hey, this takes me back.”

I looked at the screen Iroha placed in front of my face. It was a photo of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei making a double-peace sign and looking like she was high off Echo Grass. She was surrounded by liquor bottles and mountains of weeb merch like anime Blu-rays, yaoi doujins, posters, and figures.

“It’s kinda weird you’d have a photo like this, Senpai.”

“We weren’t doing anything illegal, and I call this ‘How a Respectable Teacher Managed to Convince Me She Was a Depraved Pervert in a Single Photo and Changed My Life Forever! Volume 1.’”

“I can’t believe you said that all in a single breath...”

“She’s just surrounded by stuff that makes her happy, that’s all. Though I admit it looks kinda borderline if you think too hard about it.”

“I don’t think you even need to think that hard to find it weird. Whenever you’re with her, your mind tends to get dirtier, Senpai.”

“I’d have to agree.”

I had an enduring habit of psychoanalyzing myself on a daily basis, and that had taught me something. As a side effect of getting close to everyone and their talents in the Alliance, it seemed their personalities were starting to influence my own a little bit. Spend too much longer with Shikibu, and I might become her myself. The thought sent a shiver down my spine, but I decided not to dwell on it too much.

“We took that photo just after we met. We were gonna send it to her family without warning.”

“Okay, Satan! I don’t even know where to start with that!”

“The idea was that if they saw how much she loved her hobbies, we’d be able to convince them. We never went through with it, though.”

“Seriously, thank God you didn’t. Man, I don’t even wanna think about what would happen if you *did* send it.”

“Yeah. I didn’t really know much about her family back then, so I decided to be cautious. That ended up being the right answer in the end.”

“Know thyself, know thy enemy, right? That’s what you’re always saying.”

“It’s one of the forty-eight things I’m always saying, yeah. It’s a good thing to remember.”

Human relations were like a battlefield. Economics was a battlefield. Life itself was a battlefield. It was all about objectives, balancing advantages and disadvantages, and scrambling for limited resources. That was what war was, when stripped to its bare bones. The secret to effectively winning at life lay in the art of war. That was

how I saw it.

“You’re getting Sumire-chan-sensei to search her grandfather’s house so you can learn about the enemy, right?”

“You could say that, yeah.”

While Iroha and I were going through the Ceremony of Knots, Sumire was at her grandfather Kou’s house, who was absent. Her target: child porn, which she would search for with all the grace and gallantry her family had inherited from their ninja roots.

“I still can’t believe *that’s* what you’re looking for to take down her family,” said Iroha. “Hold on, are you even sure it’s okay for us to be coming down the mountain right now?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, if the villagers spot us, they’re gonna realize what’s up before Sumire-chan-sensei has a chance to dig anything up.”

“I guess that *would* throw a wrench in the works.”

“Right?! So we should—”

“Your health is the top priority. The plan comes second.”

“Eck?! Th-The heck?! H-Hey, if you’re gonna say super-smooth stuff like that, maybe don’t deepen your voice at the same time?!”

Deepen my voice? What was she talking about? It was the first time in the almost seventeen years I’d been alive that I’d ever been accused of that, or saying “super-smooth stuff.” Nobody had ever commented on my voice at all. Perhaps, in the few seconds I said my line, I had been possessed by some kind of spirit with a cool, deep voice.

I decided I would take it as a compliment; it was a pretty nice thing to hear, after all. The moment I did, I felt my happiness gauge suddenly shoot up more than I expected. Must’ve been that the whole “magic” of the ceremony and everything hadn’t worn off yet.

I needed to remind myself not to get too big-headed. There was nothing worse than when an averagely average guy like me got it in their head that they were the pinnacle of humanity.

“You’re an important asset to the 05th Floor Alliance, Iroha. We’d be screwed if you got tetanus or something.”

“But solving Sumire-chan-sensei’s problem is also an Alliance mission, right?”

“Well, yeah. But I wouldn’t say it’s really an important one.”

“What?”

“I’m saying it’s not really an issue if they find out it wasn’t Sumire-sensei taking part in the ceremony.”

“You— Wh— Huh?! H-Hold up!”

Iroha seemed completely flummoxed by my carefree attitude. *Of course she is. I haven’t explained myself.*

“I did say Kageishi Kou was a pedo, and that we might find child

porn at his house. But..." I grinned a grin so sinister, it would give even Iroha a run for her money. "I was totally bullshitting."

"Huh?!"

"Some people say you gotta fool your friends to fool your enemies, but that isn't what this is about. I was playing the long game when I told that humongous lie. Our real target isn't porn. It's something else entirely."

"Wait, what happened to the sexy scene where you suck on her wound to draw out the poison? It's a staple in anime and manga! That's what we were all waitin' for!"

"Uh, sure, if the wound's poisoned in the first place. In our case, adding the bacteria from my saliva to the wound would just heighten the risk."

"Always the realist, huh? But whatever. Lemme just pray you can get into one of those situations later."

"Look, I don't think this is something you should be wasting prayers on."

"Wait, I'm getting a response... They said, 'Don't worry about it, just lick her all over.'"

"They sound as desperate as you."

Interlude: Mashiro and Sumire

“My other name is...Makigai Namako.”

Those determined words dissipated into the air, leaving only the steady donking of the shishi-odoshi, that bamboo fountain, as a clue that time was still passing. The only people here were my student, Tsukinomori Mashiro-chan, and me, Kageishi Sumire.

Moonlight filtered in through the unlit traditional garden. It made her look stunning here, in the hall of the Kageishi House. Her hair shone silver, and her eyes glowed like a light source of their own. Normally I'd be squealing out about how cute she was and how I wanted to squeeze her tight and that I loved her as much as Ganymede (Ganymede is one of Zeus's servants in Greek mythology and he's a gorgeous kid and I love him a lot, okay?)...but even I knew to be serious right now.

But wait. What did she just say? It was so out of the blue, I could only react as if I were the dense and clueless protagonist of a romantic comedy. Not to mention what she just said was impossible! I mean...

“It's not nice to mislead your teachers with lies! Makigai Namako-sensei's a guy, right? So you can't be him.”

“I'm not lying. I can prove it.” Mashiro-chan pulled out her phone and began to flick her thumb over the screen with that super-fast dexterity all teenage girls seemed to have. Then she brought the device up to her trembling lips.

There was a buzz.

“Huh? Oh, that's mine. Wait...”

I was getting a call through LIME—from “Makigai Namako.” My heart nearly leapt out of my chest before picking up a steady, heavy rhythm.

Talk about crazy timing, but...wait. Did that mean she *was* serious? I mean, it could still have been a coincidence, right?

But wait again. Didn't Aki mention something about Mashiro-chan staying at the inn with her editor? She was putting together a manuscript for a newbie award, and just so happened to pick up the same editor as Makigai Namako-sensei. And if Mashiro-san and Makigai Namako-sensei were the same person...it would all fit. Perfectly.

Makigai Namako-sensei was Mashiro-chan this whole time? No way. No way...

My finger trembled as I tapped the call button. “H-Hello?”

“That yuri anime you recommended wasn’t bad, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.”

“That yuri anime you recommended wasn’t bad, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.”

The first voice belonged to the teenage girl standing in front of me. The second came a fraction behind it, and seemed to belong to a curt young man. Those voices differed in their types, but the tone and intonation matched perfectly.

“Do you believe me now?” the voices asked.

That voice had been at every single party the Alliance threw. He never showed up in person because he was “too busy,” but there was no doubt that it was him: the best-selling author.

“A voice changer? You mean, you really are Makigai Namako-sensei?”

“Can you really not believe the evidence of your eyes and ears?” they asked together.

“I don’t *wanna* believe it! That’s why I’m finding it so hard to accept!”

It took more than a thousand years for the geocentric model to be rejected as well, I might add.

“You don’t ‘want’ to believe it? Oh, right... I’ve gone too far...”

“Duh! This is utter betrayal!”

“Heh, you’re angrier than I expected... I thought I was prepared for the worst, but...I guess I deserve this...”

I wasn’t about to let up just because she looked sad. Mashiro-chan was Makigai Namako-sensei! She wasn’t a young man! She was a teenage *girl*!

“I can’t believe AkiNama’s a straight ship! My life is over! Oh, the betrayal!”

“Huh?” That was all Mashiro-chan said while a wail ripped my soul from my body. I got it: she was disappointed in me. But I had to share this with her, for the sake of my core beliefs.



“Look, there’s nothing wrong with straight ships. I’m personally capable of loving any gender, any age, and any genre of character, so I get it. But you can’t just rock up to me one day and tell me one of my yaoi ships was actually straight the whole time! Even I, with my S-rank in flexible thinking, need some time to adjust!”

“W-W-Wait—”

“W—W—ait—”

“You’re breaking up!”

The voice through my phone crackled, as though the distress of her heart was interfering with the signal. The app was struggling to pick up her frantic vocal range and her wobbly voice. Frustrated, Mashiro-chan exited the app.

“*That’s* the part you’re upset about? Not the part where I pretended I didn’t know anything about the Alliance, when actually I knew everything, and used that to get close to you guys? You don’t think that’s really creepy?”

“Um, yeah! What could be worse than the entire premise of my ship flipping upside-down?”

Did she even realize what she’d just done to me? I mean, yeah, it was a surprise to hear that one of the students I cared most about was in the Alliance. Not to mention hearing that “he” was actually a “she.” I wouldn’t call it creepy or anything so dramatic, though.

“Wait, it’s actually pretty awesome if you think about it in a different way. A pretty girl disguising herself as a guy. I have this special ability where I can go from being all ‘yaoi or die’ to ‘actually, straight couples are super hot too’ in less than a hundred seconds.”

“Pfft. Aha ha ha! I’ve never heard of such a dumb ability before! What are you, stupid?”

“I’m not stupid! You do realize I’ve been through college, right?!”

“There’s a difference between book smarts and regular smarts. But maybe Murasaki Shikibu-sensei wouldn’t know that.” Her nerves gone, Mashiro-chan’s face bloomed into a smile and she shrugged. The way she was speaking right now reminded me more of Makigai Namako-sensei than her usual self, and I was really starting to accept that what she told me was true. My chest was filled with warmth.

Coincidences sure are funny things, huh?

I began to squish Mashiro-chan’s cheeks like I was molding clay.

“S-Stop that! My face isn’t a toy!”

“Heh! Sorry, I’m just kinda emotionally overwhelmed right now.”

“It still counts as sexual harassment, even if both people are girls! And that means I can call the police on you!”

“They’re just your cheeks! How’s that sexual harassment?!”

“I’m going to spread all kinds of rumors about you on social

media, and about how you're so useless that you can't even respect a girl's space!"

She sounded serious, so I decided to try and remember not to touch her so lightly from now on. But she was so squishy.

Just one more pinch!

That pinch earned me another glare, so I gracefully backed away.

"Damn, though, I can't believe no one figured it out. The power of technology, I guess."

"Me neither. I was waiting for someone to figure it out, but no one ever did. I thought it was because no one cared about me..."

"That's some negative thinking if I ever heard it. You and Makigai Namako-sensei are so different I don't think anyone would really make the connection."

"How is he any different from me?!"

"He's a literal king! A best-selling genius who dived head-first into the creative world." I started rattling off my thoughts on Makigai Namako-sensei like a machine gun. "A guy so smart, you can tell even when talking to him over LIME! The shining star of his generation who's at the cutting edge of his indus—"

"Ah! Okay, stop! I get it!" Mashiro-chan cried, staring at the floor.

Oh my God, she's so red! That's adorable!

"That's what I really think of him, you know," I said.

"That's what makes it even worse. I'm j-just...not as great of a person as you think he is."

"You don't think much of yourself, do you? I really do respect Makigai Namako-sensei from the bottom of my heart, though."

I thought back over the conversations I'd had with him in the Alliance's group chat. He was a professional author completely and openly dedicated to his craft. He was filled with self-confidence and was a genuinely interesting person to speak to.

"I have so much admiration for him," I said. "I think it comes from the fact that I'm like some spirit drifting between the titles of teacher and illustrator. This is kinda embarrassing to admit, but he's everything I want to be. He always was and he still is."

"N-No more, please. Your compliments are gonna kill me..."

"I can't believe it, though." I giggled. "To think Makigai Namako-sensei was that self-conscious transfer student in my class."

"I-I'm sorry he wasn't who you thought..."

"Hey, *that's* why I'm not mad at you! You know the gap between the way you're so shy in real life but so confident in the group chat is super moe, right? Forget killing with compliments, this gap moe is way deadlier!"

"H-Hey! Ah!"

That insecure look on her face was just so adorable, I couldn't

help but sweep her up into a tight hug and ruffle her hair. The way she squirmed awkwardly in my arms just made me love her even more.

"It's like your other self is just so...dominating, you know? Did Aki know about all this? Is that why he let you hang with the Alliance?" I asked, keeping her in my arms. Her hair smelled super good too!

Side note: I know dominating can be kind of a lewd word, but that wasn't how I meant it. For once. Let's just say I was being creative with my word choice.

"No, Aki doesn't know yet."

"Oh, really? Does that make me your first?"

"Don't say it like that."

Shot down.

Mashiro-chan raised her fists up in front of her tiny chest. "I can't tell Aki. I'm still too...scared for him to know."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because I don't want him to know it was me who wrote that garbage novel."

"Don't say it like that."

"This isn't me being modest or anything. I think the story's pretty good, but...it's g-garbage at the same time."

Right. I totally didn't get it. The thought process of a genius writer must be too mysterious for us mere mortals to understand.

"I poured all of my impure desires and feelings into Makigai Namako's novels. When I think of Aki reading them, it's...it's just way too embarrassing."

"But he's a huge fan of your work. He asked me a billion times to read it before I officially joined the Alliance."

"I know that, yeah. And I'm fine just hiding behind Makigai Namako's name. I'm just..."

"You're too scared to have that work become Tsukinomori Mashiro's?"

"Yeah..."

"I can understand that, but personally I think it's kinda suffocating having to keep your true self hidden— Huh?" I suddenly felt a piercing pain strike my chest.

"What's wrong?"

"U-Um... Uh..." My chest was still throbbing painfully, but I didn't know why. Trying to explain that to Mashiro-chan seemed like a waste of time, so I decided to change course. "Right, I wanted to ask! Why did you tell me about all this? You could've told Aki or Ozu, but you told me. Must've been because of my beauty and my trustworthiness as your wonderful homeroom teacher, right?"

"You stuffed too many adjectives into one sentence."

I thought it was funny, but Mashiro-chan was more concerned with my stylistic choices. It was very Makigai Namako of her.

Mashiro-chan shook her head. “No. I mean, maybe you being my teacher had a bit to do with it. But that’s not the main reason.”

“What is then?”

“I just felt like you...like Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and I were alike. I thought you’d understand me.”

We’re alike?

I frowned. Her words were so unexpected it was taking me a while to process them. Makigai Namako was a literal king; there was a world of difference between him and the half-baked Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I had no idea how to respond—especially when I was detecting a hint of *envy* in her eyes.

Kageishi Sumire the teacher always said that if you didn’t understand something, it was your duty to ask questions immediately. That was what the Venomous Queen in my head was telling me to do, and so I complied.

“Um, how are we alike, exactly? I feel like we’re total opposites.”

“I can’t speak with everyone unless I’m hiding in my creative shell. That’s a bit like you, I think.”

“Ah.”

Now I understood. And now I could guess what that strange throbbing pain in my chest was. I couldn’t speak properly with my family unless I was in my teaching persona: Kageishi Sumire. I was lying, wearing a shell. I could sympathize with Mashiro-chan because I knew how suffocating it was living a life while hiding my true self.

“See? We *are* opposites, but we’re also similar. That’s why I thought you’d understand. And I thought you’d be able to keep it a secret from everyone too.”

“Of course. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Okay. And if you do tell anyone, I’ll send evidence of that sexual harassment just now to the Board of Education.”

“You don’t wanna maybe turn the threat level down a notch?!” My eyes watering, I looked up at her.

“I was kidding,” she said plainly. “I wanted...companionship. That’s why I’m telling you this.”

“Companionship?”

“It’s like I said. I don’t want the Alliance to disappear. I don’t want to lose my connection to Aki.”

“Because you’re his girlfriend?”

“No. That’s a lie too. I’m not really his girlfriend. We’re in a fake relationship because of a deal Aki made with my dad for the Alliance. You probably realized there was something weird about it, right?”

What could I say? Aki had already explained everything to me.

His false relationship with Mashiro-chan was strategic; its purpose was to get us a job at Honeyplace Works.

Mashiro-chan didn't wait to see my reaction. She just kept on pouring her heart out to me.

"I love Aki. Those feelings aren't fake, not like the relationship. That's why I want the 05th Floor Alliance to survive."

I'd be lying if I said her outpouring of feelings didn't surprise me. I already figured how she felt, but I never thought I'd hear her confessing so openly. For someone who used to be a shut-in, she could sure be bold and reckless when she needed to.

"Canary-san said if you and me stop gaining from the Alliance, it's going to disappear. And I know how she looks, but she's actually really smart, so I believe her when she says that. So I want you to help me think of something... Some way that staying in the Alliance can benefit us."

Mashiro-chan had decided exactly what she needed to do, but her reasons were heart-breaking. This editor of hers sure had a lot to answer for, unloading all this stuff on her when she must've known how sensitive Mashiro-chan was. She sounded smart, but ruthless—which reminded me a bit of Aki.

"Promise me something? Even if we find this child porn and you're free to be an illustrator, please don't betray the Alliance!" Mashiro-chan grabbed my sleeve. She was keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the floor, but her tone was enough to tell me how much this meant to her.

I sighed inwardly, but not in exasperation. She said she wanted companionship, but I doubted that was her biggest motivation. Mashiro-chan had shared her secret with me because she was worried I'd leave the Alliance the moment this undercover mission found success. She must have sensed this was one of those huge events like in a visual novel that'd lock you onto a certain route.

"Oh, Mashiro-chan, honey! You're totally jumping to the wrong conclusion!"

"Huh?"

"There's nothing for you to worry about. Aki—sorry, Akiteru-sama—is the only director who'll ever be able to get me to actually stick to deadlines!"

"You make it sound like you're proud of it..."

"Tee hee!" I poked my tongue out at her.

I was putting on a bit of an act, to be honest. I *am* pretty good at keeping my cool, if I do say so myself.

"Well, it'll be good once you're set free, but please stay with the Alliance. However...can I talk to you about stuff? And please don't tell anyone about Makigai Namako."

“You got it! I’m not about to betray the trust of a stunningly gorgeous girl like you! I’m a wallflower, remember? My job’s to make sure I don’t cause any trouble—but I’ll still be supporting you in secret! Promise!”

“Okay. Good.” The relief was clear on Mashiro-chan’s face. With that, she went back to rooting through the Kageishi house.

It was a while before I got back to it myself.

Mashiro-chan is Makigai Namako-sensei...

It felt like I’d been passed a hot potato on the verge of exploding, and the Alliance was feeling more like Aki’s personal dating sim by the day. As the adult of the group, what was *I* supposed to do? One thing was for sure: I wasn’t about to spill Mashiro-chan’s secret to anybody.

I’m sorry, Mashiro-chan. I told you a little white lie...

She had asked me to stay with the Alliance, even once I was free. But that probably wasn’t going to happen.

I’m sorry, Mashiro-chan. I know I’m your teacher, but I might end up letting you down...

Chapter 3: I Can Only Speak About My Friendship with My Friend's Little Sister!

"I'm done, physically and mentally. Lemme rest a sec."

"You sound like a sumo wrestler at the end of his successful twenty-one-year career. You work so hard it's probably affecting your endurance, Senpai."

"It's because you're so heavy."

"Aha ha, so rude! It's hilarious how you're so stupidly insensitive!"

I had spotted a rocky area on our way down the mountain, and set Iroha down so we could take a break. I longed to get mad at her for making fun of my weakness, but I knew that'd only make me more tired, so I ignored her.

I opened up the bottle of mineral water I got from the love-hotel-shrine and poured it down my throat. It seemed to rejuvenate my tired limbs.

Water... There is truly no finer beverage.

That mini-fridge in the shrine had a wide range of stuff, but I'd gone straight for this. Water was all I really kept at home too, except for tomato juice. I also had coffee and tea when I felt like it, but water was by far my favorite *and* the most cost-effective drink around.

Hamburgers were the most delicious food in the world, and water was the most delicious drink. It was a scientific fact that I made up all by myself.

"Mmh..."

"Huh? Oh, you want some?"

Iroha was holding her hand out to me. As I understood what she meant, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a fresh bottle to pass to her.

"Mmh... Mmmh!"

"You don't want some? Then what?"

Iroha had darted away from the bottle, but kept her hand outstretched. She was staring at my left hand like she wanted something. That's the hand I used to hold the bottle I'd just drank from.

"You want this one instead?"

“Mmh!”

Her lips were still sealed shut, but that sounded like a yes to me.

“Why? Wouldn’t you rather have a fresh bottle?”

“Mmh. Mphmhmph!”

“D-Don’t laugh like that. You’re being really creepy.” I shuffled back a little and passed her my opened bottle.

Wait, wasn’t this one of those indirect-kiss-type deals? Iroha probably knew that and was planning on teasing me about it. I could hear it now.

You really wanna kiss me that much, even if it’s indirectly?!

It was already too late by the time I’d realized it. She already had the bottle.

“Thank you!” She started glugging it down. “Man, that’s good!”

I stared. “Huh?”

I waited for the teasing to start, but it didn’t. Maybe she *did* want an indirect kiss, but that was all there was to it.

W-Wait. She wanted *what?! An indirect kiss? With me? N-No way.*

Ugh, my throat feels dry again. What’s wrong with me, getting all worked up over nothing?

I took out my second bottle, hoping another drink would calm me down.

“Senpai!” Iroha crooned. “Mmh!”

“Huh?”

Iroha put down her bottle beside her and held her hand out to me again. Apparently she wanted the one I’d only just opened too.

“I just gave you one.”

“Yeah, but I want that one now!”

“There’s no difference between them. They’re both water.”

“Yeah, I know! But I wanna drink that one now! Please?!”

“Uh...”

What the heck was she up to? Her behavior was weirding me out, but it wasn’t like I was being totally normal today either. Usually I’d just call her a dumbass and drain the bottle myself while ignoring her. I was a pretty objective judge of my own character, so I could say that with a very high degree of certainty.

So why couldn’t I do that now? There had to be some kind of error in my brain: something preventing me from behaving or feeling as I normally would. Try as I might, I couldn’t rebuke Iroha as she grinned mischievously at me, her hand still outstretched. Instead, I...I...

Okay, this is gonna sound really embarrassing.

But in that moment, I thought she looked kind of...cute.

And once I started thinking that, my thoughts threatened to go in a super weird direction!

“Too slow! Got it!”

“Ah.” The bottle was taken from my hands while I was still trying to work out why my brain was malfunctioning.

Iroha glugged the water down, letting out a purposely loud sigh of relief when she was done. She put the lid on both bottles and held them between her fingers like a certain wolf-like mutant’s retractable claws, waving them up and down. She clearly had no intention of giving them back to me at all, which was only made more clear when she started laughing to herself.

“What are you doing?”

“Havin’ fun! This way, you can’t drink *anything*!”

“Wait. That’s all you were after?”

“Eeyup!”

“Ee-nope! Give me one back. I’m thirsty, you know.”

“Hm, lemme think...” Iroha brought each bottle to her soft lips and lightly kissed the lids. She grinned and shot me a triumphant look. “Y’know, I’ve kissed *both* now!”

I gawked at her.

“You probably don’t wanna drink from a bottle I’ve already drunk from, right?”

“Er, I—”

“Oh, but if you admit that you wanna drink water from a bottle I’ve put my lips on, it’d make me feel *so* much better! I’ll even give them back to you!”

“Grk!”

Now she was asking me to *beg* her for an indirect kiss?! I bit my lip as my arms trembled from the humiliation washing over me. Apparently, Iroha thought I was acting strangely, because she leaned forward and peered at my face with a frown.

“You losing your ability to give snappy comebacks or something?”

“N-No. You’re just imagining things...I think.”

“No way it’s my imagination! Normally you would’ve reacted ages ago!” Iroha prodded at my cheek with the end of a retractable cla— plastic bottle.

“Q-Quit it. That tickles.”

“See! Look at you gettin’ all embarrassed! That’s not like you at all, Senpai!”

“C-Cram it. I’m tired from lugging all that stuff down the mountain.”

“Huh? You sure about that? Feels to me like that’s just an excuse. Wanna look me in the eye and repeat that?”

I could feel my face burning scarlet, and I’d rather die than let Iroha see it, so I pointedly looked away from her. That, of course, piqued her curiosity, and she deftly leaned over from where she sat to

try and get a good view of my face.

Annoyingly enough, her movements reminded me of a small woodland beast and were therefore adorable.

Okay, what the hell is wrong with me? Normally she's just "annoying," so why is it that she's "annoyingly cute" or "annoyingly adorable" now?!

"I know I'm changing the subject super suddenly, but I was just thinking that Ozu might come up to get us while we're making our way down."

"Uh, yeah. That is super sudden."

If I let her keep trying to push me, I was screwed. My only choice was to force a change in subject. I kept it up even in the face of Iroha's less-than-impressed response.

"Sudden, but important. It's basically up to him whether we live or die at this point."

"I'm guessing he'd let us die for his entertainment."

"Who exactly d'you think your brother is?"

"A fully automated criminal robot with a heart of ice who takes pleasure in torturing others, of course."

"Shots fired."

"Oh, wait, no. I meant, a fully automated criminal robot with a heart of ice who takes pleasure in torturing others version 2.0."

"That just makes it worse. Though I guess you could say he's been upgraded sort of recently."

As with all updates, some features were better before the update.

"You sure we won't miss him, though? This path loops all over the place."

"That it does."

Iroha made a good point. It'd be impossible for any normal person to find who they were looking for on a strange, complicated, and mostly unpaved path like this one. But Ozu was a one-in-a-million genius with as much processing power as a quantum computer. He was Kohinata Ozuma, Japan's modern-day answer to Steve Woz**ak; a real-life version of Ton* Stark.

That was what I called him at least. Anyway, the point is...

"Ozu'll be able to guess what I was thinking and what route we came down, and use that data to pinpoint us on the map."

"You sure trust him a ton."

"Well, yeah. It was his smarts that attracted me to him in the first place."

"Okay, now I want you to remember that line and say it again when Sumire-chan-sensei's listening!"

"I'm not some monkey who's gonna perform for you, y'know."

"I was just kidding. That's just how male friendships are, right? As

Ozuma's sister, I can see how perfectly compatible you are."

She said she was kidding, so why was she staring at me so intently like that? I already had to warn Sumire on a near-daily basis to stop forcing her immature fantasies on us, and I didn't want to have to do the same for Iroha. Ozu and I simply didn't have that kind of relationship.

Admittedly, I was guilty of recently coming up with a similar sort of fantasy between Iroha and Midori, Sumire's younger sister... If I berated them too much for that kind of thinking, it'd only come back to bite me in the ass later. I guess letting them have freedom of thought was okay for now.

"You really think Ozuma'll come and save us?"

"You sound like you don't."

"I dunno. You know what he used to be like. He wouldn't even offer his crying little sister a comforting hand," Iroha said indifferently, stretching luxuriously on the rock like a cat.

I stayed silent. She spoke about her brother as casually as if we were catching up at a school reunion, but I knew the true, painful depth of her words. I bit my lip. My chest tightened as I imagined just how Iroha was feeling right now.

Iroha seemed to notice the air was getting serious, so she quickly fluttered her hands at me. "W-We get on totally fine now, so don't worry!" she said quickly. "And that's all thanks to you, Senpai!"

"Happy to help wherever I can."

"Ozuma's changed tons since he met you, Senpai. I still don't understand how his brain works or anything, but it finally feels like he really wants me to be happy."

I wanted to keep the atmosphere of the Alliance light, so I tried to avoid talking about its members' serious pasts. Her mom Otoha-san's strict values weren't the *only* reason that Iroha suppressed her dreams and interests to play the part of a harmless honor student. That wasn't to say I endorsed the matriarchal dictatorship that was the Kohinata household—far from it.

I just always thought it would be good for Iroha to have at least one person at home who could accept her true self unconditionally. I knew full well it wasn't my place to meddle, especially considering what I was placing on the line to do it; I was just her brother's friend who lived next door. And it wasn't like Iroha couldn't tolerate the injustice. Her situation was far from some perfectly balanced sand castle that kept building up and up but was always on the verge of tipping over.

"Ozuma didn't hate me or anything back then, y'know. No more than anyone else."

"He didn't hate anyone. He just didn't *like* anyone."

“Right. He was neutral on everyone. Indifferent to them. It always felt like I was talking to a bug or a robot even though he was my own brother.”

“He didn’t even know the meaning of the word ‘communication.’ It was like he didn’t know how to empathize with people properly.”

“His scores in math and science were perfect, but he literally got zeroes on every Japanese test.”

“Can you blame him? Ozu never saw the world in the same way we did, and he didn’t breathe the same air. It must’ve been like everyone was speaking a foreign language to him. He’d need to translate it before he could understand—and that worked both ways.”

“But there was one person who broke down those cultural barriers.”

“It really wasn’t *that* big of a deal. I just became his friend.”

If I had to make a comparison, I’d say Ozu’s mind worked like a highly intricate computer. Everything it processed was either a 1 or a 0. Any phenomenon he came across wasn’t dealt with by emotion, and all the superfluous social and background information was ignored. His brain just ran the same fixed algorithm to come up with a perfect and absolute solution.

As someone who valued efficiency above all else, I felt we were similar, but even I’m aware that I’m the type to be more influenced by emotion. I wasn’t able to separate my decisions from my emotions or human spirit. I was a fraud in some ways; I sang the praises of efficiency, and at the same time let my emotions get in the way.

Not so for Ozu. Ozu was perfect. Ozu was who I *wanted* to be.

I never understood why he didn’t fit in at school with a head like that on his shoulders. I didn’t understand why people treated him the way they did. That was why I was persistent when dealing with him, trying again and again to get him to be my friend.

“I swear I nearly passed out from shock when Ozuma said he’d brought a friend home. I thought maybe some weird cult got him.”

“I get you. Even the smartest people with the most impressive educational background can get caught by those.”

I *wasn’t* trying to get Ozu to join a cult, but that was beside the point.

“That was when it started—that day you first came round ours. Ozuma started...warming up, I guess I’d call it. It was easier to talk to him. I thought you had to be some kinda wizard or something! I was super curious about you, y’know!”

“A wizard, huh? Sorry to disappoint, but my ‘magic’ was never that sophisticated.”

“How did you do it, Senpai?”

“Not telling.”

“Hmph! C’mon, it’s been long enough! How’d you reprogram Ozuma’s personality?”

“Stop asking me. That’s a secret that’s staying between us men.”

“Okay, now I want you to remember that line and say it again when Sumire-chan-sensei et cetera!”

“Like I said, I’m not some monkey who’s gonna perform et cetera.”

It hadn’t been easy, teaching Ozu how to communicate with others when he was an outcast among outcasts in our class. I had gone to the library over and over and searched every last corner of the web for academic papers, all to teach him about human behavior and psychology with science-backed sources. I taught him using fiction books focused on human relationships, with romantic comedies as my first port of call.

I wasn’t trying to teach him about emotion, but about the patterns in those relationships. I made him play dating sims where the choices required you to understand what each girl was thinking and feeling, with the aim of having him clear them.

It took a lot of trial and error, but finally Kohinata Ozuma evolved into the guy he was today.

I never told Iroha or anybody else how I got through to him. I mean, I *couldn’t* tell them, because—

“It’s weird, y’know?” Iroha said.

“What’s weird?”

“Back then, I only recognized you as the guy I sometimes saw in the hallway of our apartment building. I never thought—and I bet no one else did either—we’d end up sleeping together!”

“Y-You make it sound so wrong. We were just sleeping in the same room at some inn, that’s all.”

Well yeah, we did end up in the same futon because of Iroha being sleepy-headed, but I wasn’t about to bring that up.

“What I’m saying is, I never even thought we might end up this close at the time.”

“Yeah...”

Iroha had never been more than my friend’s little sister back then; someone I’d occasionally spot when I went to Ozu’s house and who I’d only hear talk when she needed something from her brother. That might still be partly true, actually. Iroha was *still* only my friend’s little sister. Let me explain.

I’d established the 05th Floor Alliance, directed my team towards a position at Honeyplace Works, worked hard to keep any awkwardness out of that team, looked after Iroha, and aimed to set Murasaki Shikibu-sensei free. All of that was for Ozu’s sake. All of it. I’d selfishly gotten everyone involved in this entire scheme just for

him.

My chest pricked with pain. It was probably the guilt. Every time Iroha was nice to me, every time she told me I was a good guy, I felt that pain deeply and keenly in my conscience. I didn't look out for Iroha because she was Iroha. I looked out for her because she was Ozu's sister—my friend's sister. There was nothing more to it than that. In some ways, her constant teasing was a positive thing. That wasn't to say she couldn't tone it down some, of course...

If Iroha got the wrong end of the stick about my actions and ended up falling for me because of it, the guilt would probably crush me. The entire Alliance centered around Ozu, and so did my work for it. It'd be bad if Iroha misinterpreted that work as me "being kind," and I didn't even want to think about what might happen if she started liking me.

Based on Iroha's behavior towards me, the most logical conclusion was that she had no romantic interest in me at all, which was nothing but a relief. What about the possibility of me having feelings for Iroha?

Nope. Couldn't happen.

The wind rustled the grass and leaves as though conversing with me; as though it were listening to my inner monologue.

The 05th Floor Alliance was like a sandbox I'd created just for Ozu. All the other members were just my pawns.

"That's why I can't justify forcing Sumire-sensei to stay in the Alliance," I murmured to myself.

"Huh?" Iroha's shoulders twitched at my sudden admission.

"I'm using her for my own objectives. That's all."

"No, that can't be all. You're thinking of Sumire-chan-sensei in all this too."

"It's true that I've been trying to find a path that benefits both of us, but that doesn't give me the right to restrict her options."

"Wow, Senpai, you sure are a pain in the ass." Iroha sighed.

"Takes one to know one, clearly."

"Come over here a sec." She beckoned to me.

"Hm?"

I approached Iroha, who was sitting like some celestial maiden on top of the rock.

"Kneel down. Oh, but don't even think about licking my feet."

"I wasn't gonna. Anyway, why do I gotta kneel in front of you like I'm your knight or something?"

"Just do it! Quick!"

"Fine. Ugh. Why d'you make me do such weird stuff?" I grumbled, but still kneeled in front of her like she asked.

"There, there..."

Huh? Wait. What was that she said? And what was this indescribable sensation on the back of my head?

“What are you doing?”

“Forcing you to relax. Your annoying personality means you don’t get to do that much.”

“I dunno what you mean.”

“Let me put it simply then: I’m patting you on the head.”

“Well yeah, I worked out that much. I just dunno *why* you’re doing it.”

I felt her fingers moving delicately through my hair. Iroha’s comforting warmth emanated from her palms, making me want to just melt on the spot. There must have been something wrong with me. It was such a simple gesture, but it was making me like Iroha approximately three thousand times more than I usually did.



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“Haven’t I always said you don’t know how to be kind to yourself, so I want you to let me do it for you? It’s the opposite of what you wanna do, so I’m basically just being annoying like always, right?”

“Your logic is flawed,” I replied wearily. I couldn’t be bothered to fight back properly.

I couldn’t help but notice the sweet, feminine scent drifting from Iroha’s body right by me. I could hear my heartbeat drumming in my ears.

How would she react if I hugged her right now?

Would she accept it? Or would it make her uncomfortable? She was always my friend’s sister, and our relationship was one built on convenience. It was only now that my ideas about that relationship were morphing. I could see myself how pathetic that was, but would she think so too, or would she be able to see me in a romantic light after all?

I was being stupid. There was no way I could do something like that. I couldn’t even work out if the thing messing me up tonight was love or not, so to act on the presumption that it was would just make me the worst.

I was about to pull away from Iroha when we heard the sound of footsteps on grass. Iroha and I spun around in the direction of the noise. Had the wild dogs followed us down here? Or was it some other wild mountain beast?

I stood up and positioned myself in front of Iroha before glaring in the direction the sound was coming from. I’d done some brief research into how to deal with most mountain encounters. Whatever it was, I’d get rid of it for sure.

I stared into the gloom while mentally hyping myself up. Then, it appeared from deep within the forest trees. The moonlight traced the creature’s outline as it parted the leaves and approached.

“Congratulations! I guess the one hundred percent success rate thing was true after all! Even you two dummies were brought together by it, huh? Data never lies!”

It was a teenage boy, grinning and applauding us. Kohinata Ozuma.

“Ozuma?!”

“Ozu! Don’t sneak up on us like that! It’s creepy!”

“Sorry, was I s’posed to wait? Maybe click through another thirty textboxes till you were done?”

“This isn’t an H-game.”

And it still wouldn’t be anything like one, even if he *had* waited!

“Thirty? More like three with Senpai as the protagonist!”

“Don’t try and rile me up, Iroha. Because you...you won’t! No

way.”

“Hmm... Really? You think I won’t be able to getchu with my charms?”

“Ngh! Get your face away from me!”

“See! You’re getting flustered already! You’re way too easy to tease!”

“Shut up and quit it already!”

Iroha prodded at my stomach repeatedly while making clicking noises. Annoyed, I pushed her off and turned away.

“Oh, the two of you get along so wonderfully!” Ozu chortled and grinned at us.

“N-No, we don’t! She’s just trying to annoy me!”

“Deny it all you want, buddy! That just makes me believe you less!”

“Ngh! Okay, fine! Fine! Maybe this *looks* like flirting if you look at it out of context. But let me tell you now: it means nothing! Well?! Believe me now?!”

“Yeah, now you’re being defensive, which just shows how head over heels you are for her. You’re never gonna be taking your eyes off her! Every move she makes, every breath she takes...”

“That sounds creepy, and your reference is forced and outdated.”

Who the heck was going to get that in this day and age?

Ozu suddenly spotted Iroha’s foot.

“Oh...” he murmured, seeing the towel wrapped around it. “Sorry, I almost forgot you were rushing down the mountain because Iroha got hurt. I guess we don’t have time to mess around.”

“R-Right. Mind lending her a shoulder too, Ozu? Iroha, if you lean on both our shoulders, we should be able to make it further down no problem.”

“No thanks,” Ozu said.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Uh...”

I stared at Ozu as he searched for an answer and glanced at Iroha. She stayed silent and averted her gaze.

“It’ll just make her feel weird, y’know, seein’ as I’m her brother and going through puberty and everything... I don’t think she wants anyone touching her but you, Aki.”

“Huh?”

“O-Ozuma! If you wanna be considerate, try doing it without saying weird stuff on top!”

“Oops, sorry. I don’t know when to stop talking sometimes.”

“I know that! But here’s a clue: stop talking *now*, please!” Iroha snapped.

Ozu just shrugged as though trying to brush her off. They were

clearly trying to act natural, but they were doing as good a job at hiding the weirdness as someone who tries to patch up a plain T-shirt with a patch of some overly cute chibi character who looks way too happy to be there. I wasn't rude enough to point it out, though, especially since we had more important things to worry about.

"What's the point of you being here if you won't help me take her?"

"I'm here to do something only I can—and that's showing you the quickest, shortest route back to the village." Ozu smiled like I'd asked him the simplest question in the world and pointed into the darkness.

It was a totally different direction to the path we took coming up the mountain for the ceremony. There wasn't even a hint of light coming from that place, and if we had a gamemaster, they'd be doing their darndest to steer us away from going down there. Worse than that, I could just about hear something that sounded like the low grumble of creatures coming from that dark, otherwise silent, forest.

I tried listening harder, which only confirmed that I *could* hear those noises. It was hard to describe them, but if I had to, I'd say they were kind of low and rumbley.

"What are those noises?" I asked.

"That path's not used much, so the electricity was off. There were some minor security blocks and stuff in place, but I got through them no problem. I made sure to set them back up when I was done. Also simple, since this place is in the middle of nowhere."

"S-Seriously?" I stared at him.

Kageishi Village was a remote settlement that seemed to have missed the memo about the Industrial Revolution—or so I thought. That was why I'd discarded one possibility completely out of hand, without even bothering to search for its existence. I just didn't think they'd have something like *that* here, but if they did, it would've been the most efficient way to get off this mountain by far. How could I ever call myself a master of efficiency again if I overlooked something that obvious?!

"I found it. A symbol of modern convenience, hidden within these mountains of Kageishi Village."

Ozu switched on his phone's flashlight and lit up the darkness he'd come from. There it was. That steel structure.

"The latest in chairlift technology."

"I knew it!"

The very latest too!

"They seriously had one of these babies here?"

"Guess you guys wasted your time with the whole piggyback thing, huh?" Ozu laughed.

All the tension drained from my body, and I sank to the floor as

Iroha grinned at me sheepishly. Carrying her had been an emotional strain for me, and she had to face the risk of me babying her. I did feel like I suffered way more than she did, but I decided not to think too hard about it.

Sorry, Iroha. If only I did a proper search of the area, I could've gotten you to the village much quicker. Forgive me for my pathetic show of inefficiency.

Ozu got on the chairlift first, and Iroha and I followed. The artificial coolness that touched my butt as I sat sent anxiety sparking through me and I let out a sigh. I was born and bred in the city, unused to stuff like this.

Ozu tapped a few buttons on his phone and we were underway (don't ask me how he controlled the lift with his phone, because I don't know). The lift swayed as it brought us slowly down the mountain. The twinkling stars and the silver moon shone above us, their light illuminating Iroha's face as she looked up at them.

I wasn't thinking straight because of the relief of being on our way, so I ended up staring at her. Noticing my gaze, she turned her face in my direction. I braced myself for her to start teasing me about it, but her next words were quiet.

"I wonder how Sumire-chan-sensei's doing."

"Heh."

"Why are you laughing?" Iroha's cheeks puffed up in a pout.

"S-Sorry..." I slapped my hand to my mouth to try and stop myself laughing even more.

I just thought it was sweet how much concern Iroha was showing for Sumire. Both of them were so kind-hearted. It was that kindness which made me feel genuinely guilty for getting them involved in the Alliance when it only existed for Ozu's sake, and it was that kindness which meant I wouldn't stop them if they decided to break away from the group. It was that kindness which pushed me to find a solution for Sumire that wouldn't force her to harbor gratitude for me.

"I'm sure she'll be fine. She's Sumire-sensei."

"You think she can keep searching without being caught?"

"Nah. I'm almost certain she is gonna get caught. By her grandfather."

"What?!"

"But that's fine. She needs to be caught."

Iroha stared at me blankly.

I smirked at her before continuing. "That's when Kageishi Sumire's career as an illustrator will finally get off the ground."

Interlude: Mashiro and Sumire 2

“I’m not finding anything. But I swear I could smell loli coming from behind here...”

“Loli has a smell?”

“My nose is as keen as a doberman when it comes to sniffing out impure porn! That’s why they call me the wholesome hunter!”

“I’ve never heard anyone talk about themselves in a less appealing way...”

We were in the elegant traditional room with the sunken fireplace. I peered behind the scroll (on it was the kanji for “steadfast principles”), but there was only wall behind it. I thought there might be a safe hidden there or something, but no.

This place was just like one of those huge traditional Japanese complexes you’ve probably seen in anime. It had the tatami room, the inner parlor, the living room, the reception room... Mashiro-chan and I searched them together one-by-one, but we found no evidence that my grandfather was a connoisseur of child pornography.

I was starting to sweat.

W-Wait, this is bad, right? If we don’t find anything, then what have Aki and Iroha-chan gone through that stupid ceremony for? And Mashiro-chan—she’s already going through enough. I’d feel terrible dragging her into this too!

Nooo!

Aki was hardly ever wrong about this kind of thing, so I was totally sure we’d find *something*.

“What exactly does child porn look like? Will it be a magazine, or a disc, or what?” Mashiro-chan asked.

“Uh, I didn’t really think about it. Maybe just some thin book with a lewd cover.”

“But you get those loli magazines with perfectly respectable covers, don’t you?”

“You sure do! Most people don’t even know what they’re looking at when they first see them!”

“So we’re looking for a book or magazine, right? Whether that’s thin or thick...”

“Probably, yes. My grandfather’s generation is only used to reading paper, and I doubt this place has really caught on to digital media yet.”

“Okay. Then we should think about where someone might hide a book.” Mashiro-chan put a hand to her chin and started thinking hard. It was adorable. “What about those cardboard boxes in the closet? These here?”

Mashiro-chan opened up the closet in the tatami room and pulled out the cardboard box from inside.

“Oooh! What makes you think that’s what we’re looking for?”

“It’s hard to pull out, so there’s less risk of the rest of the family finding it. If you don’t want a book getting damaged, obviously you’d usually put it on a shelf but, well, it’s obvious why he wouldn’t.”

“I get you. But what if the family’s doing a spring cleaning? They’d go through those kinds of boxes, right?”

“That’s simple, actually. You just put regular books at the top to hide the others. I was always the only one who read in my house, so my brother or anyone else would just see there were books in there and leave the box alone in case they got an allergic reaction!”

“Clever. Very clever.” I nodded. “Wait, you have a brother, Mashiro-chan?”

“Um, yeah... I haven’t heard from him since he moved out, though. He said he had an idea for an even better business than our dad, and left just like that.”

“So is he even still alive, or...?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ouch. You don’t sound like you care one bit. He’s your brother, y’know!”

“I haven’t seen or spoken to him in years, so he’s basically a stranger to me now. Maybe he’s been in contact with Aki; they did get on well.” Mashiro-chan sounded disinterested as she continued rummaging through the box.

“Aki always says Ozuma-kun’s his only friend,” I reminded her immediately. Her statement just now was a real threat. “Aki can’t have any other friends or my ship’s in danger.”

“He probably cut off contact then. I feel like being friends with my brother would only bring bad luck anyway.”

“That’s some way to talk about your brother.”

I wondered what kind of person he was. It made me realize that no two families were alike. Another thought struck me too. Although Mashiro-chan was Aki’s cousin, she could also be described as his “friend’s little sister” just like Iroha-chan was. It was a funny little coincidence that I never picked up on before.

That wasn’t important, though! There was one other tidbit that I couldn’t ignore!

“You seem to know a lot about hiding doujinshi, Mashiro-chan. Anything you’d like to share with the class?”

Her mouth fell open.

“What are you into? Shota? Lori? Who’s your favorite artist?! You never bite when we talk about this nerdy stuff, so I thought for sure you weren’t interested, but you gotta be if you’ve got whole boxes full of doujinshi!”

“Ngh... S-Stay away from me, dummy!” Mashiro-chan pushed her hand against my face to stop me getting any closer.

“Awww. You’re such a meanie.”

“R-Remember what I said?! I’m Makigai Namako!” Mashiro-chan deepened her voice slightly.

“Yeah, I remember. So?”

“We talk about nerdy stuff all the time over LIME, right? I’m even nerdy enough to keep up with you. You get it yet?”

“Oh! Right! Makigai Namako-sensei *is* a nerd!” I slapped my knee as it all came together.

“So yeah, I have books like that, and I hide them in my house too.”

I whistled. “I never had you down as someone who kept secrets from your family.”

“I hide stuff from everyone... Okay, this is no good.” Mashiro-chan put back the box whose contents were unfortunately wholesome before staring at the floor. “I hide a ton of stuff. I couldn’t even tell Aki or anyone else about the Makigai Namako thing before telling you.”

“Are you scared to tell them?”

“Yeah. But it’s hard keeping it a secret as well. It feels kinda gross, and it makes my heart hurt...”

“That’s probably guilt, huh?”

“I think so. I also think the guilt might be better than the alternative, though...”

Keeping our true selves a secret made us feel safe, but hiding our true selves from the people we cared about made us feel guilty. But we kept going down the path of least resistance and least change because it was less dangerous than the other.

I understood the discomfort guilt could cause when it was left to build up. I understood why Mashiro-chan was blaming herself. I understood, and that was why I’d decided—

“Damned thieves!”

A wild, bear-like growl boomed in my ears. The room, once dark, was filled with a retina-searing white light.

When I was ready to open my eyes to that blinding light, I saw a man as tall as any bear. His powerful beard grew rampantly, and he

had a scar over one eye that looked like it was caused by a wild beast. The way his breath came out in white smoke reminded me of those creepy guys who show up in splatter movies.

Seeing him now, I didn't know who in their right mind would make him a teacher. He looked more like the head of some bandit group.

This intimidating man was my grandfather, Kageishi Kou.

He glared at me. "Sumire. What are you doing here? You're supposed to be taking part in the ceremony."

"Grandfather..."

Mashiro-chan let out a small sound, like the air had been punched out of her. My legs were trembling from fear, and I knew she was scared too; she was hunched over, shivering.

I can't show her I'm scared! Am I her teacher or what?

I put on the cool mask of a teacher and made a show of checking my watch. "The shrine is at the mountain peak, is it not? How could you have come down so fast, given you were traveling on foot?"

"Duh! I biked down."

"Huh?" My mask slipped at his uncharacteristically modern response.

Calm down! Hold it together...

My grandfather dangled his keys in front of my face. I could practically hear those veins that were bulging on the sides of his head.

"The path from the village to the mountain shrine is steep indeed. But if you go past the shrine, there's a road that comes down the mountain's opposite side. My bike was parked there, so I rode it down just to come here and find you doing something infuriating!"

"You had a *bike* prepared?! Does that mean you suspected me from the start?"

Why else would he have hurried to come back like that? Iroha-chan's disguise was perfect, and so was her acting. He shouldn't have had any reason to suspect a thing!

"Do you think my head's full of fluff?"

"Huh?"

"Okay, Google! Bring out the projector!"

I almost yelled out in astonishment. Anyone would! This was an old traditional Japanese house in the middle of nowhere, and I was watching as Google Home opened up the ceiling and brought a projector screen sliding down like we were in some school auditorium.

Mashiro-chan turned to stare at me, her face pale. "S-Sumire-sensei, I feel dizzy... Like my worldview's just been flipped upside down..."

"You're a professional author and even your brain's getting broken by this?!"

“It’s because this... No author would write in a contraption like this unless they were inexperienced or had gone totally off the rails... But then, this is real life! Ow... My head...”

“Stay with me, Mashiro-chan! I’m feeling the exact same way!”

I propped Mashiro-chan up. She was swaying from being deeply affected by this monumental blow to her perceptions. Awww, she was so sweet and delicate...

The projector screen lit up with the LIME app, as though to stop me having any impure thoughts. It was the Kageishi LIME group—the one I was in. My grandfather suddenly had a tablet in his hand which he was flitting his fingers over. Some photos appeared on the projector next to the LIME screen.

“Here are your messages in chronological order, Sumire. I had a program analyze their contents and time stamps, and it found that there was no way you had a boyfriend.”

“Where do I even start with this? First off, let me just say thank you, very terrifying.”

“The program has been fed marriage conversations of all types for the purposes of deep learning, so it is highly accurate in its analysis. Don’t think this is just some baseless assumption.”

“But I—”

“Yes. You said you had a ‘bee eff,’ and you even showed us pics from your date to stop us from arranging a partner for you. We were in an uproar! It was the worst rebellion since Ooshio Heihachirou’s rebellion against the shogunate in 1837!”

“Mind leaving out the internet slang? It makes it hard to take you seriously.”

“Okey dokey.”

That didn’t take much...

“In our confusion, we came up with a hypothesis.”

“A hypothesis?”

“We suspected you were colluding with this Ooboshi Akiteru-kun. Pretending to be an item so that you wouldn’t have to marry the partner we chose for you. But that’s just a theory. A lame theory.”

Lame? Everything’s totally correct!

No way. He had seen through me right from the start. I wasn’t the wholesome hunter at all...I was a straight-up clown (but also still a hunter).

“It didn’t help that you brought a whole group of whippersnappers with you when you came back to the village. You were clearly trying to set up some kind of scheme to mess with the Ceremony of Knots.”

“You mean you were pretending we had you fooled the whole time?”

“Yes. All to catch you here, red-handed.”

“How did you know I’d be here?”

“Because you wanted to search the house, didn’t you? Find my weakness... Hope I had the same interests as you. You wanted to find some leverage.”

I stared at him. What was I supposed to say to that?

He knew everything right from the start. That was what it sounded like. And I mean *everything*—he even knew about my “interests.” All hopes of cornering him with child porn were dashed; I was the one on trial, not him.

I racked my brain for a way out of this situation.

He knows. He knows, he knows, he knows.

Those two words flashed again and again through my mind. It felt like my grandfather had his hands on my face and was forcibly ripping my mask off. I was trembling down to the tips of my fingers.

My grandfather narrowed his eyes like he was sliding in between the cracks of my broken shell. “Manga. Anime. Yaoi. You love these arts, don’t you, Sumire?”

“I—”

“Your parents noticed long ago that you were obsessed with anime. That you were hiding and secretly drawing manga and other illustrations. As the family head, I heard all about it.”

“What?”

“Children often naively think they can hide things from their parents. I have seen hundreds, nay, thousands of children born into this family. I know you love this ‘Arashima-kun’ character, I know you adore that manga about the royal heir who plays tennis, I know all about those boys scrambling for love in that academy in the afterlife, then there are those legendary swords—”

“Y-You can stop now, please.”

It was like he had a complete list of every series I’d ever obsessed over. So did my parents tell him, or what?

“Do not misunderstand. Your parents did not rat you out. They came with an earnest request.”

“What request?”

“They thought you might want to be an illustrator instead of a teacher, in your heart of hearts. They asked me to permit it, if that was truly what you wanted.”

“My parents tried to go against you?!”

My father was so serious I wasn’t sure he knew how to smile, and my mother, while having a freer past, was always following half a step behind him. She was the ideal picture of a submissive Japanese housewife. I always thought their lives were built around respecting rules and sticking closely to the family’s teachings and its long,

cultured history. It was their attitude that had made me think I had no choice but to follow in their footsteps.

"I exploded at them, baffled as to why they'd ask something so ridiculous. I knew it wouldn't be possible to scold you and set you straight unless I had a perfect understanding of the path you held so dear. Therefore!" My grandfather slammed his fingers over the tablet.

I saw them then: a collection of treasures. They bloomed like flowers and floated like sparkling bubbles over the projector screen. They were images of gorgeous e-books and stellar downloaded doujinshi. I recognized almost all of them. Books from my most adored authors, books which I'd been reading through and gushing about only last week.

But that wasn't all. There was one creator's work that outnumbered the others, and it was too much to be mere coincidence. A group of works closer to me than any other, which I loved more than any other, and which I hated to see up there. More than any other.

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's doujinshi..."

"That's right. My failure to understand you came from a generational gap which I sought to close. It was then that I came across Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's—no, *your*—art."

My mouth dropped open.

"Don't worry. I'm the only one in the family who knows of this. I haven't even told your parents," he said, as if he knew about the terror running through my head.

All I could do was stand there in shock. Those words could never be enough to ease the horror that every last one of my secrets was out.

"Nobody in our family has ever strayed from the path laid out by our traditions. The birth of computers and the internet changed our society faster than ever before. I anticipated there may be those born in the family whose values I could not understand," my grandfather said. "In order to learn about your feelings and ambitions, I read as many doujinshi of this nature as I could, and even had conversations with young people over social networks. I am still learning about the language called slang, but I am finding it most enjoyable." His bear-like face twisted into a smile. A ravaged man like him smiling like that looked quite sweet, but the next second his eyes narrowed grimly again.

"Despite this, I still cannot understand your thoughts. My only remaining choice is to sit down and talk it through with you."

"Was that why you set up the marriage partner and asked me to come home in the first place?"

"It is. I wanted the time to have a frank discussion with you. Tell me what you really want, Sumire. Is it your intention to break our

family traditions to follow the path of an illustrator?"

"I, um..." I mumbled.

I thought I'd gathered all the determination I needed, but the words caught in my throat. My grandfather glared at me accusingly.

"You are a Kageishi!" he bellowed. "And yet, in acting as a teacher without the needed commitment, you have befouled the path of education! If you reject the life of an artist and fail at being a teacher, what are you then?! Being uncommitted is the greatest shame of all!"

You're wrong. He was right that I was neither one nor the other, but there was nothing shameful about my life!

You're wrong. I wanted to say those words out loud, but I couldn't. Maybe it was because he was right after all. I was a shameful human being who failed both at being an illustrator and at being a teacher.

Maybe he wasn't wrong. Maybe he was right, but—

"You're wrong!"

Huh?

It wasn't me who shouted—so who was it?

"Sumire-sensei is a genuine teacher! Don't talk like you know all about her!"

"Your name?"

"I don't want to talk about the movies your young friends taught you about, I—My name's Mashiro. Tsukinomori Mashiro. I'm in Sumire-sensei's class."

"Very well. Please enlighten me as to what I am 'wrong' about."

"Sumire-sensei is the only person...the only person who's ever really protected me."

Looking into my grandfather's eyes like that must have been terrifying, but Mashiro-chan kept on speaking, grabbing onto one of her trembling arms to keep it still.

"My homeroom teacher from my old school never bothered with me. Even when I was bullied and I went to talk to her, she never took me seriously and just brushed me off. She pretended she didn't see what was happening. She just said I needed to have more confidence, like I was the problem... I *really* hated her."

"Certainly, she sounds like a disgrace to all teachers. I hear there are many like her out there."

"But Sumire-sensei's not like that. She really cares about me. She and Aki let me join in with their fun group. She's... She's...!"

I was astonished to hear how Mashiro-chan truly felt about me. As a teacher, I always tried to do what I could for my students, but I wasn't interested in being rewarded, nor did I ever feel they were that grateful to me for what I did. Her outburst surprised me, but it also filled me with warmth.

Mashiro-chan leaned forward and stared at this beast of a man who was twice her size. “Don’t make fun of her! She’s the best teacher I ever had!”

She spoke those words so adamantly that they almost sounded hostile. Tsukinomori Mashiro had always been a very frail student. I had learned as much from the reports I read when she transferred to our school, but it was only confirmed as I spent more time with her. If she was going to risk saying anything that might cause outrage, it was going to be to someone she knew wouldn’t take it to heart; someone who cared for her, and who she was confident would still care for her afterwards. Someone like Aki or the 05th Floor Alliance members.

Back when Mashiro-chan had only just moved to our apartment building, I heard that she ran into some of her old bullies. Apparently she stood there frozen, unable to do anything as they picked on her. It was only because Iroha-chan chased them away that nothing happened, but Mashiro-chan herself didn’t have the courage to stand up to them.

But now here she was, standing up against this terrifying beast, all for someone else’s sake—for *my* sake.

She’d grown, hadn’t she?

“Of course she’s a good teacher. She may be rotten, but she is still a Kageishi. It’s only natural she’s inherited some of the right skills.”

“Does that mean—”

“But that is irrelevant!”

“What?” Mashiro-chan’s face was alight with hope for only a second before her expression froze.

“One lie has enough power to destroy a thousand virtues. Sumire has spent a long time hiding behind a mask. How can you know that her kindness to you wasn’t just another act?”

“W-Well... I mean... Just because she’s been dishonest about one thing doesn’t mean everything else she does is dishonest as well...”

“While that may be true, you must understand that we are not omniscient gods. We are powerless humans. Not all of us are willing to overlook one or two lies like you are. You cannot expect the majority of people to rely on you and trust you after you’ve deceived them.”

“Uhh...”

“Sumire may have worked hard for the sake of her students. She may have been a kind, thoughtful teacher. But she was hiding an even more powerful ambition behind the facade of a teacher. No matter how she treated you, her heart was never in it. Can you really tell me she was being sincere? Could any of her students tell me that, and truly believe their own words?”

Mashiro-chan said nothing, but just bit her lip. It must have felt

like he was talking about her. She was clutching the fabric of her clothing hard, and even as her eyes were watering, she worked hard to maintain eye contact with him. But that was all she could do—she didn't have any words left to reason with him.

My grandfather's words applied as much to her and her Makigai Namako persona as they did to me. I couldn't blame her for being hurt. In fact, it was my fault for being so wishy-washy this entire time.

I'm sorry. I really am a failure of a teacher. But thank you for sticking up for me.

I was a coward, and I hated myself for it. I wasn't even able to gather the determination needed to follow through with my own decision about my own life. That was why I was grateful to Mashiro-chan. It was because she was there, taking on the pain of being called deceitful, that I felt confidence welling up inside me.

I was going to do this. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and Kageishi Sumire were going to do this together. I was going to prove that the way Mashiro-chan and I chose to live our lives *was not wrong*.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was a sign. I wasn't going to let my grandfather look down on me, and for that I had to be ready to fight. I switched it on: the Venomous Queen persona that shook my class to its core.

"Just how long are you planning on insulting us like this?"

"What?" My grandfather—no, Kageishi Kou—flinched slightly at the change in the air.

He was the head of our family. The man my parents had warned me to obey for as long as I could remember. Everything about him was uncompromising: his appearance, his personality, his demeanor, his convictions, and his authority. My whole life, the thought of putting a toe out of line never even crossed my mind. But now, my determination was set. It had been, ever since the moment Aki pushed me to search through this place.

I had no evidence I could present to Kageishi Kou, but that didn't matter anymore. It didn't even matter if it existed or not. Fear had held me back, but the choice to do whatever I wanted had always been there from the start.

"What's all this talk of 'following the path' of an illustrator?" I always had a choice. I was finally going to make it. "I have no intention of giving up my teaching career."

"Huh?" I heard Mashiro-chan gasp beside me.

Sorry again, Mashiro-chan. I know it's a shock, but this isn't gonna end up the way you think it will.

"Who on earth is 'Murasaki Shikibu-sensei'? I've never seen those filthy pictures you've put up on the screen before."

"You plan to keep on lying, Sumire? I've seen you participate in

those doujinshi markets with my own eyes.”

“Maybe that’s what you think, but look how old you are. Your vision must be failing.”

“I’ve seen the name ‘Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’ written on a wooden prayer at the shrine of a creative god! The handwriting analysis came back saying it was yours!”

“You sound like a stalker, which I frankly find pretty disgusting. It doesn’t matter how much evidence you have, I’ll never admit to it. No matter what anybody says, I’m Kageishi Sumire—a teacher!”

“So it’s stubbornness you’ve chosen. Just admit it! Then you can live however you want. I already know everything about your interests in art! And if it’s what you really want, I—”

“You don’t understand, grandfather. I don’t need your approval,” I said coolly. And then I turned my back on him. For the first time ever. “I won’t give up on being a teacher. And I won’t get married. I’m not going to follow this family’s rules. If I want to quit being a teacher or if I want to get married later, I will, and I don’t care if I have permission or not. I’m following my own path. And if that means you want to cut all contact with me, you can! Just let me say...”

My grandfather’s face flashed into my mind. The times we spent together when I was young; when he was strict with me, and when he was kind and took care of me. Pain jolted through my chest. I shook it off. This would be the first and the last time I ever pretended with him. I had to pretend that I wanted to rebel.

“Thank you. For everything.”

Even at the very end, I couldn’t completely shake off the goody-two-shoes attitude that was burned into my genes. I turned back to him, just once, and bowed my head. Then I spun around again.

“Sumire...”

I heard his strained voice calling behind me. My heart throbbed, but I forced myself to leave the Kageishi residence behind with a tottering Mashiro-chan in tow.

After walking for fifty meters or so, the tension suddenly drained from my legs and I slumped to the ground between the rice paddies.

“S-Sumire-sensei? Are you okay?” Mashiro-chan asked anxiously, heroically lending me her shoulder.

“Ha ha! Yeah, I’m fine! Don’t worry. That was a hell of a final boss fight, though...” I waved my hand at her to reassure her, but the listlessness didn’t fade from her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Sumire-sensei.”

“What for?”

“If you just answered your granddad’s question and said you

wanted to be an illustrator, he might've let you, but because I tried to stick my nose in..." Mashiro-chan's dainty shoulders drooped.

She was blaming herself even though she hadn't done anything wrong. That was just the kind of girl she was. That was why she couldn't criticize anyone unless she was comfortable with them.

"Don't worry about it. Actually, your outburst made me happy. You said I was the best teacher ever!"

"D-Don't get too excited about that. If you turn into Shikibu now, I'm gonna tell you what I really think!"

"Aww, your tsundere side is super adorable too!"

"St-Stop nuzzling me! I'm trying to be serious!" Mashiro-chan pushed my head away with one hand. She was really cute when she was embarrassed too! I wanted her to stay that adorable forever, but maybe I was just being selfish.

"Heh. Well, you don't need to worry. I never had any other choice but to do what I did."

"Why?"

"If he accepted me back there, my whole family'd find out about my hobbies, right?"

"I mean, he has all that evidence either way."

"Doesn't matter. My grandfather has a strong sense of duty, as you saw. There's no way he's gonna spread around something I haven't admitted to. Sounds like my parents have known for a long time, so there's not much I can do about that. It'd just be super embarrassing if Midori-chan or my other relatives found out."

"Just 'embarrassing'? You stood up against your grandfather and risked him cutting all ties just because you didn't wanna be *embarrassed*?"

"Yeah. It's scary to think people might find out who you really are, right? I don't think it was an overreaction or anything."

It seemed totally reasonable to me, and I felt like most people would agree. So I gave Mashiro-chan my explanation straight and plain.

"Sumire-sensei..."

I laughed. "C'mon, us liars gotta stick together. Here's hoping we'll be doing just that for a long, long time!" I pulled Mashiro-chan into a tight hug to try and squeeze the uncertainty from her face.

She was like a sensitive Snow White, a sea urchin with a spiky outside but a gooey middle. Since I ended up as a teacher anyway, the least I could do was to watch over her until graduation. That was what I told myself as I felt her warmth in my arms.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was the message informing me I'd been removed from the Kageishi group chat. My mind wandered to the group timeline I could no longer see, but strangely the loss made

me feel more refreshed than sad. I smiled. Maybe it wasn't a super happy smile, but I smiled.

Then I let out a sigh.

"I guess I'm just at that rebellious age, huh?"





The Sea Sake Alliance (2)



...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i made this group for just us now! wooo!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

anything you say in here will be strictly confidential!



Makigai Namako:

Kk



Makigai Namako

Can I ask something that's been on my mind?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei:

what? you wanna know if you can still call it yuri if there's sex in it, when yuri's supposed to be pure, right?



Makigai Namako

Nope. Try not to pick a fight, will you?



Makigai Namako:

Why did you make an entire group when it's a talk between just us two?



Makigai Namako

Seems kinda pointless.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei:

It's a LIME thing.



Makigai Namako:

So it's a LIME thing, okay.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei:

i can make new groups and add more people when we change topics



Makigai Namako:

No. Don't.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei:

awww~



Makigai Namako

Don't you dare spill my secret.



Makigai Namako

If you do, Midori-san's gonna be crying.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

blackmail!



Makigai Namako

She's the type who's easy to put in her place, isn't she?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

don't you touch my sister! that only flies in 18+ doujinshi!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

that only flies in 18+ doujinshi!



Makigai Namako

Why say it twice?



Makigai Namako

Wait, the inn's coming into view.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hey, mashiro-chan?



Makigai Namako

Hey! Don't you dare make that mistake outside this group!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

sowwie...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

wait, but this is important.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

why talk over LIME when we're right next to each other?



Makigai Namako

Shut up.



Makigai Namako

Because it's easier this way.

Chapter 4: My Homeroom Teacher Has It In for Me!

“Hey, Ozu, think you could get around to helping me out now?”

“Nah, I’ll pass. Get the best friend character to butt in now, and the heroine’ll hate you.”

“And can you now explain it without the weird code words?”

“I’m the heroine’s brother. Makes it hard for me to push things in the right direction.”

We took the cable lift from the middle of the mountain down to the village entrance. I glared at Ozu, who was walking ahead and shaking his head like *I’d* done something wrong. Meanwhile, I was carrying Iroha on my back. Again. Without any help from him at all.

I’m not the only one who thinks this is weird, right? He was her brother *and* he wasn’t doing anything else, so he could’ve at least helped. Otherwise, what was even the point of him coming all the way up this mountain forest full of wild dogs?

Iroha was at the height of her pubescent growth period, and I was a guy of average stature and height. For me to carry her alone was woefully inefficient. In came the princely savior character, *not* doing his job of restoring the efficiency balance. I knew he knew that’s what I was thinking, because he was *smiling*.

“*I am* doing my job. My job is to make sure you two get to where you’re s’posed to,” Ozu said.

“Stop reading my mind and flashing me that smile like it’s nothing. You think you’re cupid, but really, you’re a demon.”

Ozu laughed. “C’mon now. This is way more fun if you’re the one doing the carrying.”

“Maybe for *you*. Iroha, stop flailing.”

“LEMME DOOOOWN!” Iroha wailed, kicked, and thrashed.

She’d been kicking and thrashing this whole time, but to acknowledge it after every line of dialogue would’ve been annoying.

“What’s the problem? You were fine when we were up on the mountain.”

“This is the village! There are people here! I mean, look! There’s Ozuma!”

“So? He’s seen me carrying you for ages now.”

“He’s watching us like we’re some rare bugs in a mating ritual! Doesn’t that bother you, Senpai?!”

Ozu chuckled. "Aww, you don't think much of me, do you? Not even I think you're a bug, Iroha!"

"See, Iroha? He's—"

"I'd label you as mammals at least. But I don't know enough weird species classification facts to label you anything more than that, so chill, okay?"

"See, Senpai?! He's saying a ton of weird, scary stuff I don't get!"

"Well, yeah, but he always does. He's Ozu."

"But it's different this time! Since you're *not* freaked out, that makes *you* weird too!"

I already knew that much. I'd spent years getting used to Ozu's peculiarities, and I had learned that accepting his weirdness without fussing over it too much was the best way to deal with him.

Iroha pushed her face into the crook of my neck. "All right. I guess Ozuma is fine, but... Ugh. It's still super embarrassing..."

"You're really that worried about the villagers seeing you?"

"Well, yeah."

"I don't think you need to worry about them. I know the sun'll be up soon, but it's still the middle of the night as far as this place is concerned."

"It's not just us who'll be in trouble if we're seen." Iroha's whisper tickled my neck.

"Ah... You'll be embarrassed, sure, but it'll mean our mission failed too."

"Yeah. The embarrassment'll be bad enough, but then there'll be the added pain of our plan getting busted."

"You don't need to worry about that. Nothing's gonna change at this point, even if we're seen by someone."

"What was it you said before? She needed to be caught so her career could get off the ground or something. Mind explaining?"

"I told you about how we met the head of the Kageishi family yesterday, right?"

Iroha nodded. "Yeah, one of those meetings where he begs you to give him great-grandchildren or whatever."

"Uh, kinda I guess. Anyway, that was when I realized something."

"What?"

According to Sumire, she had been ordered to become a teacher by her family. I'd always wanted to see with my own eyes just how powerful this order actually was. This was Japan, a country where individual human rights were guaranteed. Legally speaking, there was nothing stopping Sumire from walking the path she chose for herself. The problem was how risky Sumire *felt* it was to stand up to her family and relatives.

I wanted to see Sumire speak with Kageishi Kou herself, so I could

judge the true nature of the chains binding her heart. I was lucky to get that chance just yesterday, and it was enough to answer one of the questions I'd been holding on to.

"Sumire-sensei always said that the Kageishi family was super strict on its traditions, but that's not actually true."

"Which was why you thought her granddad might be a pedo?"

"Nah, that's got nothing to do with it."

"What? But wasn't that the whole point of our plan?" Iroha's voice cracked with shock.

The mission brief was to search the house for child porn—even though there was no evidence, solid or otherwise, that it existed. I wasn't enough of a gambler to go for a high-risk low-reward bet.

"Do you guys believe in curses?" I asked.

"Uh, not normally, but if you're gonna ask me in this kind of creepy place, the answer's gotta be a solid 'maybe,'" Iroha said.

"Right, same here. Anyone's gonna be creeped out in a place like this."

"I'll believe in curses if you show me scientific proof," Ozu said. "Otherwise, I won't. Anything curse-like going on here's gotta have a perfectly reasonable explanation based in science." Pretty much the answer I expected.

"Yup. That's what I'm getting at here."

The concept of curses was based on supernatural phenomena that didn't exist, but there *were* curse-like occurrences that snuck their way into everyday life. You've heard those stories of traditional Japanese dolls absorbing a ton of hatred from various evil spirits over the years and becoming "cursed," right? What about a human being then, who keeps hearing the same powerful words over and over? What happens to them?

"Insults are like curses. They have the power to warp the life of the person on the receiving end. If someone keeps calling you 'ugly' or 'creepy,' then you're gonna keep absorbing those words until you start internalizing it. Same goes for compliments. If people keep sucking up to you, eventually you're gonna get it in your head that you're an amazing person. If curses do exist, they exist in these oft-repeated words."

"Like if someone tells you to stay away from all kinds of media and entertainment," Ozu said darkly.

I felt Iroha twitch against my back.

"Yeah. That sort of thing too."

"When you put it that way, I guess curses do exist in some way." Ozu shot Iroha a meaningful glance. "You sayin' Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's under the same kinda curse?"

"Yup."

Though I knew this applied to Iroha too, I wanted to focus on the problem right in front of us. The problem that we knew how to solve already.

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei grew up in a house where she was constantly told to behave; more so than most households. She was told that so often that it became her curse. It made her think she was trapped, and it’s the very reason she’s not living her life how she wants.”

It was an ancient curse that had existed long before the 05th Floor Alliance came into being. The only place she could ever drink alcohol was her apartment. That was her private space—the only place where she didn’t have to worry about what other people would think. A bonus stage, in a way. A lone space where there was no need to behave. Being able to expand that space to the two rooms next to hers was probably a huge turning point in her life.

“After hearing about the situation you guys were in, I wasn’t sure where to start at first.”

“But I guess you decided her family was more likely to understand than our parents?”

“Right. I felt like her grandfather was ready to meet her halfway at least. I dunno why he tries to speak like a teenager, but it’s kinda sweet when you think of it as him trying his best.”

Kohinata Otoha, Iroha and Ozu’s mother, hated entertainment and show business because of some kind of grudge. In comparison, Kageishi Kou was just a pleasant old man.

That wasn’t to say I thought Sumire’s burden was trivial. She was just like everyone else in that it was impossible for her to have an objective view of her own situation. A third party might study her circumstances and think them so simple they’d laugh, but for the person going through it, it was as serious as life or death. Sumire was so engulfed in the darkness that she couldn’t see what was a very simple escape.

I wanted to be her eyes and ears, and light up the path for her. If I could just give her—and all the other members—that push to take the first step towards her best life, then I’d have done a good job as the Alliance’s director.

“Are you sayin’ the next time we see Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, she’ll—” Ozu began.

“She’ll have solved everything. And she’ll be free,” I said with absolute certainty.

I noticed that Iroha had gone quiet, but I didn’t comment. There was a rule between us to leave that sort of thing alone.

We stopped right outside the inn. There were two female figures

just about to step into the building. They turned around when they heard us approach. The first was Sumire, who I was surprised to see back so soon, and next to her was—for some reason—Mashiro.

“Mashiro-senpai? What’s she doing here?” Iroha whispered into my ear. I could hear the discomfort in her voice.

For a second, I was about to ask her what the big deal was, but then it hit me. As far as Mashiro was concerned, everyone around us was supposed to think that she and I were dating. I’d already explained to everyone in the Alliance that the reason I invited Mashiro to our gatherings and the reason I was acting the part of her boyfriend was because of my contract with Tsukinomori-san. But now that I thought of it, I hadn’t told *Mashiro* that everyone knew.

So basically, Iroha was supposed to think Mashiro and I were dating for real, but there she was clinging to my back, right in front of Mashiro. Mashiro would then go on to think Iroha was trying to show how close we were and that was why Iroha was feeling so awkward about it now and for God’s sake why did this have to be so complicated?!

Eh, I guess it was my fault for not gathering everybody at the same time to explain. I just thought it wasn’t a big deal, since everyone got on fine anyway. It didn’t matter what we were thinking anyway, because Mashiro was scampering up to us.

Her face was pale as she said, “Iroha-chan! You’re hurt! What happened?”

Mashiro was more concerned about Iroha’s injury than the fact I was carrying her.

I guess there was nothing to worry about, huh?

Mashiro looked up at me, her eyes bright with worry. I explained everything that had happened so far in minute detail, being sure to leave out anything that might earn me a death threat.

“Oh... Can I help?”

“Thanks, Mashiro. Mind taking care of Iroha for now?”

I’d been carrying her weight all this time and I doubted I could last much longer. I let her down onto the ground, where Mashiro was waiting with her arms outstretched.

“You’re heavier than I expected...” Mashiro admitted.

“Wah! You okay there, Mashiro-senpai?”

“Hmph! I know I’m not that strong, but I can deal with this much.” Mashiro began to walk off with her hands firmly supporting Iroha. Her steps were unsteady, but it didn’t look like Iroha was in danger of falling.

“Man, Mashiro-senpai, you smell super good! Is that the soap from the inn?”

“D-Don’t *smell* me!”

“I think I’m gonna try out the stuff they got here instead of what I brought from home! A new smell has big potential to raise your sexy stat! Sniff, sniff!”

“St-Stop that! You’re being annoying!”

“Hey, stop trying to shake me off! I’m injured! Oooh, I’m in so much pain!”

“Grr...”

The two of them looked like they had no reservations with each other whatsoever. My chest felt warm, and I couldn’t help but smile as I watched them. They really had become good friends.

An image suddenly flashed into my mind.

It was spring. The cherry blossom was falling around the school gates as Ozu and I walked through them, holding on to our junior high school diplomas. Iroha was laughing at us, making fun of us for thinking we were so grown-up just because we were going to high school. I remember turning away from her and, for a split second, I saw that smile vanish, and a hollow, sad look replaced it.

I wasn’t that bothered. I didn’t really see what the big deal was about being a year apart. We lived next to each other anyway, so we could still see each other whenever we wanted.

The gap between first- and second-years was small, but it was there. Ozu, Mashiro, and I were due to leave school at the same time, and once that happened, there was no guarantee we’d all stay in the same apartment building forever. Even the Alliance, if it lost its reason to exist, could sink at any time, like a boat made of sea foam. I’d feel much better if Iroha had a friend in her own grade who she could open her heart to.

What am I, her guardian?

I sighed as it suddenly clicked that it wasn’t really my place to meddle. This sort of problem was really something that the adults in her life should be worrying about.

“You’re looking at her like you’re her dad,” one of those adults remarked, stepping up to me with a smile on her face.

“Not my fault. It’s an occupational disease.”

I didn’t see how she felt okay teasing me right now after what we’d just been through for her sake.

“They’re both such good girls. I just wanna scoop ’em up into a hug.”

“Agreed. With the good girls part, I mean.”

“A boy your age should be agreeing with the second part too.” Sumire started prodding at my side.

“A boy my age should be able to tell when it’s appropriate to downplay his physical desires. Same goes for certain lecherous teachers.” I didn’t care about insulting her; she was annoying me too

much right now.

"I'm not like this outside the Alliance, you know."

"You could still stand to be a bit more serious with us sometimes, though."

"Huh?"

"Well, I guess it's not that big a deal."

"Hmm. How about I start right now, then?" Sumire's eyes narrowed a little as she watched her students disappear into the inn. It was easy to forget when I was so used to the goofy Murasaki Shikibusensei, but Sumire was pretty popular with the male students in our grade, not least because of her beauty. That beauty in her stiffened features caught me off guard a little then. "Can I talk to you alone in a bit?"

Sumire shot me a sidelong glance, and I instinctively averted my gaze. But it didn't matter how attractive she was; I wasn't the kind of guy to forget about my priorities. My answer was calm.

"That's fine, as long as I can make sure Iroha's been seen to first."

"Of course. There's a balcony on the inn roof." Sumire smiled and pointed to the top of the building. "The sunrise'll be visible from there. I'll show you what this village looks like without the scary mask."

After she got her wound disinfected, Iroha went to bed. Meanwhile, Mashiro returned to manuscript hell. Only then did I go up to the roof to meet Sumire. The balcony was nothing to write home about. It had a few houseplants, a bench, and a little footbath. Still, the wind of the summer dawn felt good against my sweat-dampened skin.

"Aaah, this feels great! Wanna try, Aki?" Sumire, ready for bed in her pajamas and with her hair down, had her yukata rolled up slightly and was dipping her feet in the footbath. Swarms of tiny fish were pecking at her feet like deadly piranhas. I turned my attention to the sign next to her.

"Doctor fish?"

"Yeah, that's it. They tickle, but it makes me feel healthier somehow!"

"You'd probably feel way healthier if you ate right and exercised instead of getting the collagen nibbled off your feet."

"Enough of your facts and logic! What's important is how I *feel*!" Sumire kicked her feet. Spooked, the doctor fish scattered away in all directions. When she stopped moving her feet, they gathered around again. It was kind of sad that they went back for more, even though they now knew it was dangerous. "Give it a try, just this once. It's a

big day, after all—the day I decided on my future.”

“I guess you’re right.”

She hadn’t been drinking, so as long as she didn’t get overly annoying, I didn’t mind sitting with her. I slipped my feet from my sandals and sat on the wooden bench next to Sumire. I then put my feet into the water just like she was doing.

“Guargh!” I let out a strange garble as my feet were attacked by a tingling sensation. I slapped my hands over my mouth. When I turned to Sumire, she was grinning at me.

“You sound like your body’s been modified to be three thousand times more sensitive!” Sumire chuckled to herself. “Is that the sort of noise you make in bed?”

“I-If you’re gonna have inappropriate fantasies, I’m leaving.”

“Come on, don’t be so rash. That wasn’t really enough to get mad at me for, was it?”

“Ugh. Look, the sun’ll be up soon and I’m tired. Whatever you want with me, make it quick.”

“Sorry! I know you like to get straight to the point. I’ll just get right to it.” Sumire pulled her phone out of her yukata and showed it to me.

Her LIME notifications were displayed on the screen. Just reading the latest one from her family group made my head explode with questions.

“Kageishi Kou removed Kageishi Sumire from the group.”

“They disowned me!” Sumire poked her tongue out and announced it with the cheer of a kid who did a whoopsie.

Sloooow down! What’s going on?!

I knew her grandfather was strict, but he didn’t seem like the type to come down *this* heavily on her. Unless I misjudged him, and that mistake cost Sumire her relationship with her family.

“Is this because the plan failed?”

“Oh! Nope. It was my fault. I mean, I was kinda the one who told them to cut things off with me.”

“Come again?” I stared at her blankly.

Sumire laughed loudly. I didn’t know what she had to laugh about; she’d just been *disowned*. Maybe she didn’t actually know what that meant.

“Let me explain.”

Sumire told me about everything that had happened at the Kageishi residence. They didn’t find any child porn, and were caught red-handed by Kageishi Kou himself. A lot of stuff came out, and in the end Sumire decided she wasn’t going to give up being a teacher. Instead, she made a simple declaration of war and left.

When I sighed after hearing all that, it felt like I was sighing out

my entire soul—and that wasn't because of the wonderful relaxation the doctor fish were putting me through.

"Why is *that* the decision you made?" I was exasperated.

Sumire let out a dry laugh, like she was laughing at herself. "Beats me!"

"You do realize what Kou-san was trying to get you to do, right?"

"Yeah. If I told him I wanted to be an illustrator from the bottom of my heart, I'm sure he would've let me. Why else put in all that effort to understand me?"

"I had him down as that kinda guy, you know. He might look scary, but—"

"You set things up so he'd walk in on us, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

Sumire sighed. "Well, you sure got me. You understood my grandfather more than I did. Tell me, how many times have you been reincarnated now?"

"This isn't an isekai. It was one of those things that's obvious to a third party, but less obvious to someone in the thick of things."

"Oh! I know what you mean! Like there's stuff I can see that you can't! I'm talking rom-com stuff."

"Really? Speaking totally objectively here, I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Yeah, *that's* what I'm talking about!" Sumire rolled her eyes.

It was annoying that it was Sumire, of all people, who acted like she knew best. It just proved my point about how hard being objective is, though.

"But why did you keep lying to your grandfather if it was just gonna cause a fight?" I asked. "You'd probably been happier in the long run if you'd just been honest to him about everything."

"Because I'm not that rational."

"Huh?"

Sumire may have been a sorry excuse for a human being, but she was still a math teacher. She was all about calculating, so I found it hard to believe she didn't know how to think logically.

"Truth is, before I became a teacher, I really didn't want to be one; I was forced into it. But there was someone who helped me move forward anyway."

"Was this from your time in college? This is the first you've mentioned someone like this."

"He was a newly graduated high school teacher himself. He was really confident, super arrogant, and the kind of handsome that matches perfectly with a tie and a pair of glasses."

"A guy? Huh. I didn't think you had any experience with that kinda thing."

“He taught math. He worked out, so his body was toned and his motor skills were super good. *Everything* he said sounded smart.”

“Sounds like some kinda superhuman.”

Her words brought to mind the image of a classic prince from a fairytale. As Sumire carried on talking, her cheeks were flushed pink.

“He only had one weakness: he was a total horndog. The second he saw someone he liked, he’d start hitting on them no matter their age or position, and he wouldn’t stop till he got what he wanted from them.”

“That’s some ‘weakness.’”

“He just needed to whisper in my ear, tell me to give in to him, and I turned to jelly. All I could say was, ‘Okay.’”

“Do... Do I wanna know how this story ends?”

“I’m getting to the important part now.” Sumire clutched her hands to her cheeks and squirmed as she continued. “He was a total monster! But he did teach me one important thing.” At that, Sumire launched into a monologue.

“I’ve stripped the hearts and bodies of countless people. Through that, I’ve come to learn something. Under their outer clothes and layers, people are just beasts. They all have their own filthy desires locked away in their hearts. They wear clothes and layers known as ‘social norms,’ and are so afraid of stepping out of sync with everyone else, that they become scared to show who they really are.” Sumire went on. *“They spend every single day fooling others and building up stress. Just a little at a time, but it’s constant, and it grows. It becomes suffocating. Excruciating. All they want is to strip it all off, expose all of themselves—even their indecency—and act according to their desires. There’s a reason I’m violating you here at school, in broad daylight. It’s because I want you to see what lies behind me. I want you to realize it’s all right to be as you are. Don’t hate yourself for being indecent. Wear that part of yourself with pride and keep on living. I’m showing you what it means to live according to your desires. I’m exposing myself to the world in order to save you...Keita.”*

“Wait. Who’s this ‘Keita’ guy?”

“Huh? It’s Kazami Keita-kun. The only guy to ship with Kichikuin Ryuuga-sama. How do you not know that?”

“Hold up. So this college ex isn’t actually...” I cleared my throat to prepare myself for the inevitable. “You’ve just been talking about a BL game this entire time?”

“What else would I be talking about?”

She made a good point. I was definitely in the wrong here—enough to make me want to apologize. I’d almost forgotten this was Shikibu we were talking about.

“*Kichikuin Ryuuga’s After-School Lessons...* A masterpiece that showed me how to be a teacher when I was at my lowest. It’s so good!”

It's got two of my favorite VAs in it too! They must've impregnated my ears like a hundred times!"

"Feel free to rephrase that."

"Wait, do you think I'm joking?! I mean it when I say that game prepared me for becoming a teacher!" Sumire puffed her cheeks out like a petulant child.

"I'm just saying there's literally nothing respectable about what you're telling me. It just sounds like you're trying to convince me that this guy who forces himself onto other guys is somehow a good role model."

"Look, he's physically showing students who are worrying about their identity that there's nothing wrong with being who they are!"

"I guess that does sound like a good thing. Out of context."

"I thought it'd be wonderful if I could become that kinda teacher too. Forever. Except I'm not. I'm just someone who hides their true self behind endless layers of lies." Sumire let out a hollow laugh. She kicked her feet lightly in the water, making it splash a little. "But I found someone I could save with my lies. Someone I could save, even while I lived a clumsy life. Even while I kept running away."

"Someone you could save with your lies? Who?"

"It's a secret, of course. I'm not about to sell out my allies."

"I won't push it then. Still, I never thought you'd actually turn your back on your family *and* decide to keep teaching."

That third possibility never even occurred to me. I thought she only had two options. Stop being a teacher and become an illustrator, or become an illustrator and stop being a teacher.

"My grandfather was willing to compromise, but I knew he wouldn't approve of me teaching when I can't give it my all. Cutting things off with them was the only way to carry on doing both of the things I wanted."

"I didn't know you liked teaching that much. That's what really got me."

"Are you being serious? You guys are to blame!"

"What?"

Sumire looked at me, exasperated, like I was a misbehaving child. "You gathered a bunch of kids who'd fall apart if I left them alone. Talk about dangerous! It drives my motherly instincts wild!"

"You're mainly talking about Mashiro, right? Or do you feel the same way about Ozu and Iroha?"

"I dunno, really. But it's clear how hard you're working for everyone. They're insanely talented, but they can't do anything without you. It's strange, isn't it?"

I felt the exact same way. Sumire liked to joke around ninety-nine percent of the time, but deep down she was really sharp.

“I’m actually really glad you decided to keep teaching. I was hoping there’d be at least one trustworthy adult to see Iroha graduate.”

“Why? Are you worried about her?”

“Kinda, yeah. I mean, she’s Ozu’s sister. If I get a job straight outta high school, or if I go on to college... Either way, there’s no guarantee I’m staying in that apartment. I might move out, or even go study abroad. How’s she gonna de-stress if she doesn’t have me to pick on anymore? It’d kill her to spend all her days acting like the perfect goody-two-shoes she isn’t.”

“Wait, so you’re trying to foist her off on me so I can get bullied instead?”

“Nah. She just needs somebody she can be annoying with.”

“I see... Okay. Leave it to me! I’ll take *good care* of her!” Sumire slammed her palm to her chest.

“Maybe don’t make it sound weird? What kind of care are we talking about here?” I asked darkly.

“Only wholesome stuff! You don’t trust me, do you?”

“Not a bit.”

Give her a finger, and she’ll take the whole hand and put in more dirty jokes than you could hold. You couldn’t be too careful with this woman. Yeah, I know I was the one who turned the conversation sexual *this* time, but it’s a fact I’m willing to ignore.

“Oh, but, Aki! You’re really... How do I put this?” Sumire’s eyes narrowed, and for a second she looked just like the Venomous Queen.

“What?”

Where was this mature, teacher-like attitude coming from all of a sudden?

“You just took yourself out of the equation like it was nothing.”

“And?”

“When I was talking about kids who’d ‘fall apart,’ that included you, y’know.”

“Sure, I’m capable of falling apart. Like, if some super strong gang were to corner me in an alleyway and ripped my intestines out. That...is what you meant, right?”

“Actually, I think you’d do fine in a situation like that. You’re really tough, right? I mean, physically. And since stress isn’t very effective against you, you’ve gotta be a pseudo-legendary.”

“If you think I’m impressive now, just wait till I’m fully EV-trained.”

I had to agree with her, though. I wouldn’t have been able to come this far without being strong both physically and mentally.

“You work really hard for Ozuma-kun and me, and you’re always looking out for Iroha-chan and Mashiro-chan. All without expecting

anything in return.”

“I do want something in return. It’s thanks to the Alliance that I can get an express ticket to a job at Honeyplace Works. That, and I don’t want everyone’s talents to go to waste.”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

I shot her a questioning look.

“Just being able to make such a confident declaration sets you apart from every other teenage boy out there. You have an incredible amount of willpower for someone your age, and it makes me wonder what you’ve been through in your short life to get it. Whatever it was, I can only imagine it’s been really tough.”

“Not really. I don’t think I’m that special compared to other people...”

Anyone can try hard. Anyone can think. I wasn’t some pro athlete blessed with superior natural strength, or a researcher born with super intelligence whose name history would never forget. I wasn’t a pianist with perfect pitch who saw music as color and who had a skill for manipulating sound. I was a human who had nothing, which meant I had to keep working both my mind and body. Otherwise, what was the point of me even being here?

Sumire looked at my face and sighed. “Never mind. Just don’t die before your time, okay?”

“I’ll try not to. It’d help if you kept to your deadlines, though.”

“Can’t help you there!”

“Huh?”

“Sorry!”

She was too good at deflecting when the conversation turned to her shortcomings. With super-quick reflexes like that, Murasaki might have had the potential to take it all the way to the Olympics. Luckily, they didn’t give out medals for missing deadlines, or she might be tempted.

“Anyway, now I get why you wanna keep being a teacher for the time being. That won’t be a problem for the Alliance either.”

If she continued teaching children for two, three more years, maybe she’d feel satisfied, and be ready to take her first step as a full-time illustrator. She’d be in a way better position then too. I could see Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s talent as an illustrator being put to more and more use in the long term. That could only be a good thing.

While she might have left the Alliance after all that time, it still wouldn’t change that we were able to keep her talents from being crushed.

“It’s a shame about cutting off your family, though,” I said. “Sure, it’s too late to do anything about it now, but it would’ve been nicer to stay on good terms with them, right?”

“Yeah...” Sumire turned away slightly. “But I was only taken out of the main family LIME group. It probably won’t be that big a deal. I only really spoke with my parents and Midori-chan, anyway. I didn’t have much to do with my other relatives.”

“I dunno, I feel like Midori—”

“Hm? Who’s calling me now?” Sumire blinked at her phone, which was vibrating next to her on the bench. She flicked the call icon.

“Sumire! Don’t leave meeeee!”

A wail burst out of the phone. It sounded like a toddler throwing a tantrum. It wasn’t on speaker either, so the fact that I could hear it from where I sat spoke volumes about its...volume. I thought we’d be hearing from Sumire’s little sister at some point, but maybe not this soon.

“Midori-chan? It’s five in the morning.”

She sniffed and hiccuped. *“I have to get up this early on days with morning practice, or I won’t have time to study.”*

“Ouch. Talk about overdoing it! You— Ahem!” Sumire cut herself off with a cough and straightened up her tone to something between serious and sweet. “It’s so lovely to hear about how hard you’re working, Midori-chan!”

It was the kind of talk that would usually make Midori melt into giggles. Just not this time.

“What’s going on? You’ve been removed from the family LIME group. Grandfather’s message said you were being disowned...”

Sumire stayed silent.

“Does this mean I can’t see you anymore? Are you even still my sister?”

“Don’t be silly. We *are* sisters. It’ll take more than this to destroy the bond we have.”

“But ever since you moved out to live by yourself, I’ve only ever seen you at school. School and family gatherings...”

“You’re welcome at my place whenever. Just give me advance notice. Twenty-four hours at least.”

She’d need that time to tidy up and hide all her merch and stuff. If Midori rocked up to Sumire’s place and saw all those posters of young, half-naked anime boys, or Sumire’s CD collection of fictional men whispering sweet nothings into her ear, she’d probably run away to my apartment for shelter.

I couldn’t blame Midori for being confused. She just woke up one day to find her own sister had been cut off from the family without warning. If it happened to someone like Ozu or me, we’d probably be fine. I’d just brush it off, since associating with family is inefficient anyway. Ozu would just struggle to see the issue, since he could still

message the excommunicated member over LIME even if they couldn't meet up IRL.

Re-reading that just made me realize I'm not painting us Alliance boys in a great light...

"I don't understand. Why... Why did this have to happen?"

"Midori-chan..."

"Is it because you're seeing Ooboshi-kun? Did that upset grandfather?"

"That's not it. It's tricky to explain so I won't bother going into detail, but I'm not actually dating him."

"Why not? Tell me. This is all too confusing..."

"I'm sorry. I'm a useless teacher, and—"

"And why is Murasaki Shikibu-sensei suddenly in the LIME group now?!"

Wait.

What?

"Huh?"

It was kind of funny how attached Midori was to her sister. But even then, refusing to face reality would do her no good. There was this one business Y-Tuber I watched who said that you can only grow by facing tough situations head-on instead of running away from them.

"She's not kidding. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei really *is* in the family LIME group..." Sumire mumbled slowly after checking her app.

"No way..." My mind struggled to comprehend the situation.

"But how did my grandfather know the account? That's kinda creepy..." Sumire said.

"Maybe he just searched for the ID? What's the actual account name?"

"murasakishikibusensei."

"That solves that mystery..."

"Also, I've got it set up to automatically accept any friend requests."

"That's the equivalent of leaving your windows and doors wide open and hanging a welcome sign outside your house."

"Look, I didn't think crazy internet stalkers still existed!"

In that case, she probably didn't think one of her own relatives would be one either. I watched sympathetically as Sumire held her head in her hands and writhed. Then, Midori's voice sounded timidly from the phone again.

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei has the same first name and surname as that waste of space who showed up at Ooboshi-kun's place, right?"

Just say name. Why overcomplicate it?

"It's such an odd name too... It has to be the same person!"

You've seriously never heard of an internet handle, Midori-san?

“Why is this Murasaki Shikibu-sensei in our LIME group?! I don’t understand...”

We’re all in the same boat here, sister.

“Grandfather said he adopted her, for goodness’ sake!”

Each new thing she said just brought the situation closer and closer to outright pandemonium.

“Why did you, my awesome, dignified, genuine, perfect, mature sister get kicked out, and why did this Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, who’s sloppy, undisciplined, alcohol-ridden, useless, and a failure of an adult, get welcomed into the family?! I just... I don’t understand!”

Hey! Those words are sharp! Quit swinging them around! Or your sister might not survive...

“What did Kou-san write, Sumire-sensei?”

“I’ve adopted Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. We met by coincidence (crazy right?), but she had some insane skillz that made me all hnnng I can’t even. She said she didn’t have any family, so I invited her to join ours.”

“He really smoothed things over, huh? The slang’s kinda sad, though...”

“She’s already an adult with a full-time job and cannot change her path now. I will therefore make an exception for her and allow her into our family without demanding she become a teacher. I hope you will all welcome her as one of our homies with the utmost adoration!”

“So that’s how he’s playing this.”

I suspected this was that old man’s way of showing his love to Sumire while also disciplining her. His message was clear: he would be ready to accept her whenever she was ready to be accepted. But he had also set the difficulty up a notch.

He really got her with this one. Kou-san was telling Sumire that it would’ve been easier on her if she’d made the better decision and declared herself under her own name, but by adding Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to the group chat, he was still giving her a chance to come out later down the line. If he were leading a games development team like me, I’d be calling it bad management, but he was the furthest thing from it; he was the head of a family of teachers, and this was his way of guiding her.

Sumire sounded like she was sighing out her entire soul as she hunched herself up. It was only now that her face relaxed that I realized just how nervous she must’ve been before.

“You weren’t as confident as you were pretending to be, huh?”

“Sorry, but your teacher’s not as put together as you think.”

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei shot me an awkward grin.

This always happened when she switched out of teacher mode.

The fear she felt being cut off from her family must've been crushing her. She was trying so hard to keep it together, but deep down she was as scared as anyone would be.

"Trust me, I already knew. But it's great you can go back to your family now, right, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei?"

She laughed bashfully. "Yeah. Thanks. Still terrified about telling them the truth, though."

There it was: the same loveable, pathetic smile she always had when she talked about her secret being exposed, with just one small difference. There was no resignation in it anymore.

It was around a year ago that I had started pestering her. In the classroom, the corridors, the staff room, the way home... She'd always refused me with an awkward smile plastered on her face and a slew of excuses. How would the Sumire-sensei of one year ago react if I told her what was going to happen today?

I didn't know how Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was going to use her newfound freedom, but I wasn't in a position to dictate her to use it only for the Alliance. Even then, this was for the best. I thought so back then, and I still think so now.

Sumire and I looked at each other and smiled as though we were feeling the exact same way. Like this was what it meant to be young.

I had the sense I was forgetting something, but I mostly ignored it as I made to pull my fish-picked feet out of the footbath.

"Who are you talking to?"

Ah. It was Midori I'd forgotten.

"Ack! U-Um... Nothing! I mean, no one!"

"Who's there? Don't tell me you're with Ooboshi-kun—"

"A-Aaaah! Gaarkrhjgs. Huh? Why is the sound cutting out? Afgsjgsehig! Must be because this place is in the middle of nowhere! Grhhrrrrkkk! Ffffffffff!"

"Oh! Oh, wait! I know all about this kind of thing! It's called cuck—"

Sumire tapped the end call button and her phone cut Midori off with a beep.

Whatever she was about to say, it wasn't the sort of thing an honor student like her should know about. I wasn't about to dwell on it, though. Not beyond wondering where such a pure and serious girl picked up that kinda knowledge at least.

"You sure you should've hung up on her?"

"What else was I supposed to do?! Keeping the call going would've made it worse."

"Your phone's ringing."

"Now you're making things worse!"

"Why don't you pretend you've fallen asleep? It's still super early in the morning." I pulled my feet out of the bath and dried them off

with a towel from the nearby basket, all while scrunching up my eyes against the morning sun.

I heard a splash behind me and turned to find Sumire also drying her feet. Her yukata was still rolled up and I nearly caught a flash of her thighs, so I quickly turned my gaze away.

It's like she's got no sense of modesty...

Objectively speaking, her looks were above average, and that pose made for a pretty hot image. The other guys in my class would probably drool if they saw what I just did. Unfortunately, *I* knew what her true personality was like. Solving her problem that night didn't change anything about how she was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and while I was relieved, I did find myself worrying about how her personality might factor into a future relationship.

Either way, we'd finished talking about the serious stuff and we'd both been up all night. I was more than ready to hit the hay.

"Oh, hold on, Aki. Can I ask you something?" Sumire's unassuming voice came from behind me. "What happened with the Ceremony of Knots?"

"Gngh!"

Didn't she realize we were about to end on a warm, fuzzy note? Did she have to ask something so critical right now? If this were a novel, this should totally be a chapter break. If only she had an awareness for the beauty found in story composition.

"How far did the two of you go?"

"N-Nowhere. I get you're curious, but there's such a thing as reading the mood."

"Oh, it's not curiosity! It's because I'm worried about you as your teacher."

"Excuse me?"

"N-Nothing! But I get it! You can't have spent the whole night at the shrine because you're both back at the inn now! You didn't even have time for a morning snuggle!"

"N-No, we didn't. And you can stop now, because when I say nothing happened, I mean nothing happened."

I was speaking weirdly fast. Sumire's words made me remember what had happened at the shrine, and I could feel heat spreading out from the nape of my neck. I was trying so hard to put it out of my mind, and here it was storming its way back in. The shyness on Iroha's face, her softness on my back, my arms brushing against her thighs. The memories came rushing back in vivid detail, making my heart pump wildly.

"I'm going to bed, bye!"

I left the room as quickly as I could, as though trying to run away from the mysterious storm of emotions raging inside me.

“I know Mashiro-chan’s secret, and I saw Aki’s reactions... I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now! I want to stay neutral, but...”

“Well, I ship Iroha with Aki, so if you ship Tsukinomori-san with him, won’t that make things even?”

“Hmm... Everything else is getting too meta with us these days, so it might actually work.”

“Heh. Have a good long think about it. It’s the stuff we disagree on that makes things interesting, after all.”

Chapter 5: Mashiro's Editor Has It In for Us!

"Are you going to wear this gold tie or this silver tie to school, Senpai?"

"The red one. You know, the one that's actually part of our uniform."

It was a morning like any other and I woke up in my room as usual. Iroha was standing next to my bed with a smile so serene, she looked like some fountain goddess offering me my axe back.

Wait, where the hell did she get those flashy ties from?! Those accessories only belonged on magicians, or the host of a large-scale costume contest.

"To reward your honesty, I'm going to give you both ties..."

"No thanks. I'll just take the red one. The one that doesn't break school rules."

"Aha ha ha! I'm afraid the crimson tie is currently trapped in the vortex of the washing machine!"

"Don't tell me..."

"I totally spilled juice all over your clean laundry! I'm sorry!"

"Irohaaaaaa!"

"Wah! Please don't get mad! I'm the victim here too! I thought it was regular orange juice, so I shook it, but it turned out to be max-carbonated orange soda!"

"Your first crime was coming into my house this early in the morning and raiding my fridge."

"Hey! That's all part of a lifetime project I'm working on!"

And so our daily routine continued. Starting with that painful, annoying yet ordinary morning, I headed to school.

"Lookin' tired again today, Aki."

"Yeah, thanks to your sister—wait, no. Thanks to *you*. Wait. Huh?"

The same old school and the same old classroom. Iroha was sitting in the chair behind me, her smile as malevolent as a prince from a shojo manga. Which wasn't exactly a role suited to her.

"What's the matter, Aki? You look lost."

"*You're* lost! What are you doing in our classroom, Iroha?!"

Iroha laughed. "What're you sayin', Aki? I'm not Iroha. I'm Ozuma! Sure, we're related, but we're different genders! You can't get

us mixed up that easy, surely.”

That voice was definitely Ozu's. But the appearance? One hundred percent Iroha. What was going on exactly? Was Iroha playing another prank on me?

“Good morning.” Mashiro came in then and paused. “What's the matter?”

I turned around, overcome with the serenity of familiarity. “Thank goodness you're here. Listen, Mash—Iroha?!”

“What? Don't shout at me.”

Her words were cold and harsh. Just like always. She just looked different... Well, different from Mashiro, but not different from who the girl sitting next to me actually was: Kohinata Iroha. I turned behind me. There was Iroha in Ozu's seat with a gentle, yet unmistakably masculine grin on her face. I turned next to me again. There was Iroha in Mashiro's seat, glaring at me quietly and coldly.

Irohas to the left of me, Irohas to the right. What was going on? Why was everyone Iroha?

“Time to start homeroom! Feel free to keep chatting among yourselves, as long as you're willing to get on your knees and lick the floor while I step on your worthless heads and deride you.” The violent language was the same, as was the queen's inappropriate threat. But she looked just like...

“Iroha! I knew it!”

“Oh, Ooboshi-kun! You have some nerve speaking out of turn the moment I finished warning you against it. I shall see you in the counseling office at lunch. Don't worry; I'll be sure to take *very* good care of you.”

There was no doubt that it was the voice of the Venomous Queen, Kageishi Sumire. Iroha really could play anyone! It was really impressive, except that I didn't have time to be impressed right now, because to top it all off:

“C'mon, Ooboshi. You were totally trying to be punished there! 'Snot fair that you got in ahead of us!” Even Male Student A, who I never really spoke to, was Iroha.

I looked around the classroom. More than thirty students. More than thirty Irohas. All staring back at me. No matter where I looked, there was just Iroha, Iroha, and more Iroha.

I screamed and rushed out of there, passing another Iroha in the hallway, and another who came out of the staff room. There was an Iroha in overalls in the courtyard, tending to some plants. The principal was also now Principal Iroha, and she was watering the flower beds outside.

In the end, I leaped into an empty bathroom to catch my breath. I needed to ground myself, so I looked in the mirror. There, staring

back at me, was Iroha.

“I’m in a nightmare!”



The realization shocked me awake.

This room was not familiar. It took me a second to realize I was at the inn. It was morning...except it wasn't. I checked the clock. It was already past twelve.

I remembered then. So much happened yesterday that I didn't get to bed till past sunrise.

"Man, what a crazy dream."

Everyone in it was Iroha. Seeing hundreds of them crowding up my vision was annoying. With her acting ability, that dream could probably be recreated in our game, except please no, no one wants that.

"Good morning!" sang the person who suddenly hugged me from behind.

"Gack!"

"Senpai! You kept on calling my name in your sleep! Don't tell me you were *dreaming* of me?"

I started.

"I knew it! I knew your *morning would* end up like this, if you get what I mean!" Iroha's cackle tickled my earlobe.

Her reservation and bashfulness from the night before was nowhere to be seen. She was completely back to normal. Plus, she was cracking dirty jokes. Definitely not something girls did with guys they were interested in, probably. The thought filled me with a sense of relief, which at the same time made me realize how weird I was being.

"Hm? You're kinda quiet today, Senpai. Where's your counterattack?"

"N-Nowhere. Stop it."

"That's not a counterattack! That's way too weak!" Iroha leaned forward and only made the softness of her chest against my back multiply. "Senpai? What's the matter? Senpai?!"

Why the hell is she doing that? Does she like me or something?! Why are they so soft?! What Shore durometer did they have? Where are they on the Rockwell C scale? I didn't even know if that was how you measured the softness of a chest, buuut if they could come up with an international standard for these kinds of situations, that'd be great.

"Hey, are you okay?"

My body and mind were frozen, and I couldn't pull Iroha off me. I used to do it all the time, but right now the only thing that was happening was that my heart was beating faster and faster.

"Earth to Senpai! Hey, Senpai! Senpai, Senpai, hey, Senpai, Senpai, listen!"

Was this because I was suddenly struck by the realization Iroha was a girl? Was it because of the Ceremony of Knots?

No way, that was dumb.

When I struggled with Mashiro, Iroha got mad at me and told me to return my focus to the Alliance. Where were my priorities if I let myself get distracted by Iroha right after that?

“No response? Maybe I should take you to a hospital...”

What if Iroha found out how I was feeling right now?

“Omigod, that’s so gross! Don’tcha remember getting on your knees and saying all that cool stuff before? That you were gonna push on ahead to achieve your goals? But now we spend like, two seconds together in a love hotel, and suddenly you’re in love with me? After you pretended to be a total virgin without any experience or interest in girls? You’re just like all those other guys getting distracted by love and youth and stuff. Ugh... You’re a total disappointment.”

She’d find it gross. Even if she didn’t say all that stuff, I found it gross enough myself. When I thought back to what I had said to Mashiro when I turned her down, it made me realize these feelings were totally irresponsible, that I shouldn’t be wavering, and that I deserved a hard punch in the face.

The hell is wrong with me?

“Senpai! Get! Up!”

“Arrrgh! D’you have to be so loud?”

“Oh, hey! You came back to Earth!”

“Yeah, ’cause I didn’t want my eardrums to burst!”

“Well, *you* shouldn’t ignore me! Anyway, how come you’re letting me hug you today? I thought you hated this kinda thing?”

“Uh, um... It’s not that I *hate* it...”

“Huh?”

“I-I mean, I *despise* it! Dammit! Why won’t my piece of shit body move?!”

“Uh...” Iroha let go of me hurriedly, her confusion clear in her tone.

Only when the highly volatile sensation of her weight was gone did my body remember how to breathe and stop sweating so much.

“Hey, Senpai’s acting weird!” Iroha said. “Anyone know why?”

“Wh-Wh-Who knows?! Ozuma-kun? Your thoughts?” Sumire asked.

“I think it might be time to bust out the champagne.”

“Huh? Why? You’re being way too vague, Ozuma!”

“Hmm. I don’t really think I should be the one to explain it. It’d be kinda rude.”

Sumire was already up and lolling around the room. Iroha went up to her, and the pair started whispering. Ozu was there too, grinning. They started discussing me there and then, but after talking for a while, it didn’t sound like they were coming to a decent

conclusion.

Iroha came back to me and smooshed her forehead against mine. “Maybe he’s got a fever. I mean, we were wandering around the mountains late last night.”

A jolt shot through me. “I-I don’t! I’m healthy as a horse!”

“Glad to hear it. Hmm... Hmmmm...” Iroha put a hand to her chin and grumbled like a doubting detective deep in thought. It sounded like she didn’t quite believe me.

Even *that* was bringing the word “cute” to mind, proving that there was definitely something wrong with me. I wanted my stupid hormones to shut the hell up, but I couldn’t work out how to make them.

“Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthugha f’mg ilyaa h’tthrod grah’n!”

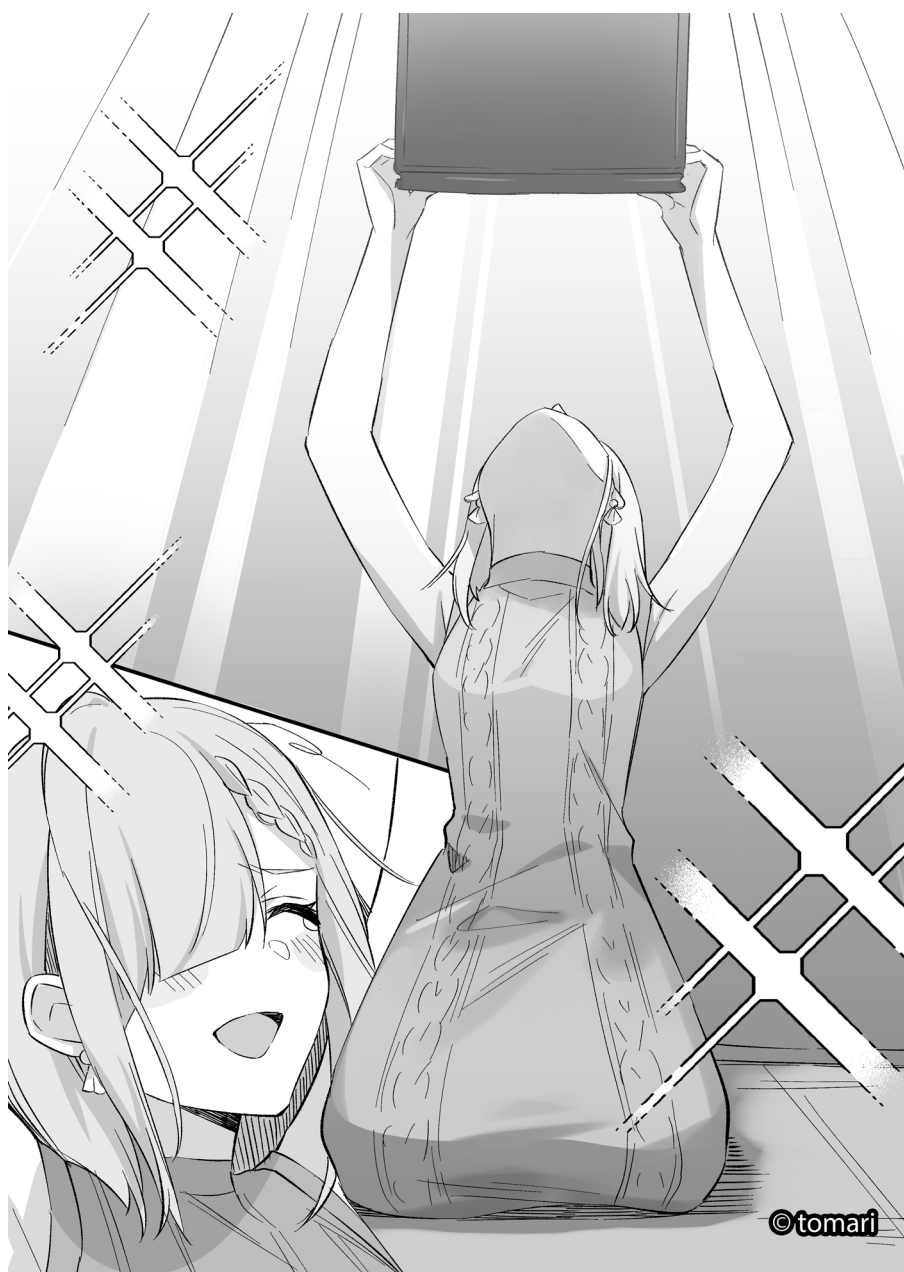
The divine chant which cracked through the air and saved me came from the next room over. It was slightly concerning that it sounded like a deity from the Cthulhu Mythos instead of something more benign, but I’d take what I could get at this point.

“What was that?” Sumire asked.

“Who else could it be if it came from the room next door?” Ozu said.

What followed was the sound of something rolling back and forth over the floor. It then stopped immediately, as though the culprit realized something. Then came the sound of someone standing up and stampeding out of the room. Next was the scampering of feet down a single meter of corridor. Finally, the door to our Bellflower Room slammed open, and just the person I expected to see came crashing through, slid across the floor, and flung her arms up in the air like the guy on the DVD cover of that one Vietnam war movie.

“I did it! I beat the deadline!” The cheering girl was holding up her laptop in both hands like it was an offering to the gods. She looked familiar. Uh, I’m not sure, but I’m guessing it was Tsukinomori Mashiro...right?



The hair she always wore so neatly at school was disheveled, and its usual lustrous silver-blond color was dull. Her skin, so pearly white it attracted compliments, was now grayed like a zombie on the verge of death. Yeah, I know a “zombie on the verge of death” doesn’t make sense, but just roll with it.

Mashiro was wearing the same clothes as yesterday; she must’ve been writing since the moment we split up last night right to the present moment.

“I... I did it... Take that, you stupid bird...”

“Guys, she’s gonna hit her face.”

“Mashiro!”

“Mashiro-senpai!”

“Mashiro-chan!”

All of us except Ozu rushed up to the exhausted Mashiro, who had indeed fallen flat on her face.

“Are you okay?” I helped her sit up.

There was a huge red mark on her forehead where she hit the floor, but it was throbbing—which meant she was still alive. But she was definitely out for the count. Her breathing was soft and even.

“She’s out like a light,” Iroha said.

“Look at that face. Deadlines suck, but the bliss when you make it just in the nick of time is addictive,” I said.

“Oh, I know! It’s getting me more emotional than the movie everyone’s going to see with their lover this summer!”

“You don’t know shit. The moment *you’re* done with a deadline, you just start drinking.”

Deadlines were inevitable when you were heading the development of a mobile game. You spend nights in a row trying to make an impossible schedule, and before you know it, you’re under the impression that you *have* to work that hard, or the final product won’t be up to standard, so you just keep on working those unnecessary hours. That was an industry trap I was determined to avoid.

I’m speaking in totally general terms, of course.

“Huh?”

I noticed Mashiro’s laptop then. It was a powerful, state-of-the-art model (no wonder, considering who her dad was) that probably wasn’t on the market for ordinary people like me. Less state-of-the-art was the small piece of paper caught in the hinge. I picked it up without really thinking about it.

I didn’t really mean to read it, but it wasn’t folded, and the letters were just there, so my brain took in the message before I realized what I was doing.

“I want to go to the beach. I’ll probably be exhausted, so if I’m asleep right now, take me with you.”

“Her dying message...” Ozu peered over my shoulder.

“She’s not dead. I think.”

“She must *really* wanna go to the beach if she went out of her way to write that,” Iroha said.

“That’s so cute! It’s like a kid leaving a letter for Santa!” Sumire said.

“Nice work, Mashiro. Take a good, long rest.”

“Amen.” The others paid their respects to the fallen hero Mashiro.

“Wait,” Ozu said, “we’ve missed our booking for the hotel by the beach, right?”

Just like that, Mashiro’s final wish was crushed.

Sumire, Iroha, Ozu, and I all looked at each other in silence.

“You did change the booking, right?”

“Nope. Senpai?”

“No, I, uh, had other stuff to worry about.”

Those were the only words spoken over the thirty second interval.

“Unfortunately, as you did not show up yesterday, we have been forced to cancel your booking. This also means we will be unable to make any further reservations for you in the future.”

The phone call I hurried to make was the final nail in the coffin. I tried calling every other hotel in the area, but it was the peak of the summer vacation, so they were all fully booked.

“No way... Does this mean...” I was too despaired to finish my sentence.

“Does this mean we can’t go to the beach?!” Iroha finished it for me with a yell, holding her head in agony.

“We could go to the beach and just not stay overnight.”

“Then we’d only have, like, five minutes there! That wouldn’t be fun!” Iroha protested.

“Not to mention, the beach is tiring,” Sumire muttered. “Having to drive for hours after all that fun... Will we even make it back alive?”

Sumire made a good point. Dying was bad. And yeah, I liked to speedrun through life for the sake of efficiency, but when that speed was reaching Eurobeat levels of tempo, it was going to be a problem.

“Senpai...”

“Sorry, but those puppy-dog eyes aren’t gonna get us out of this one.”

We really were stuck, from the moment our original plans fell out of whack. God was punishing us for failing to apply the maximum efficiency to our mission of hanging out at the beach.

“I’m sorry, Iroha. Ozu. Sumire. Mashiro. There’s no choice but to give—”

“Hold it, early bird!”

“Huh?!”

I didn’t need to look to see who it was. It was obvious from the bird pun. Sure enough, when I turned around, I saw little Kiraboshi Kanaria (Canary in my inner monologue) leaning stylishly against the door in her gothic lolita dress with her blonde hair.

“It takes a heart of gold to peck away at a manuscript over flocking with your friends! I’m so moved I’ve turned migratory! Mashiro-chan gets a perfect ten from me, chirp!” Canary flashed us a sideways peace sign that by all accounts should’ve come with a sparkly sound effect. By the way, she claimed to be seventeen.

Kiraboshi Kanaria was an ace light-novel editor at UZA Bunko. Every work she was in charge of ended up with multiple print runs, and the idol’s genius skills produced hit after hit. She was also Makigai Namako-sensei’s editor. She seemed to have picked Mashiro to go for a new writer’s award, and, by coincidence, had taken her here to Kageishi Village. Apparently, she favored this inn as a place to force her authors to hole up and meet their deadlines, and had a room booked with them year-round.

“*Listen!*” There was a long pause, before Canary—who, by the way, I greatly admired as a young producer myself—finally ended her pose with a glittery wink. “I’ve got a present for you all! A night in a deserted mansion! The sea! Sinus Amoris! I’m not just being polite, you know! You, you, and your teacher! Everyone’s invited!”

There was a strange bouncy tone to her words which seemed to stick in my mind...

One hour later, we had arrived somewhere new thanks to Sumire’s sat-nav.

When I stepped out of the jeep, I had to squint my eyes against the glaring sun. “Whoa...”

“This is it! We’re really here!” Sumire stepped onto the pristine white sand and pumped her fist. “The place of my dreams!”

A single layer of blue underlined by pure white. My chest was fit to burst from nostalgia.

“The beach!” Iroha thrust her arms out like an idol arriving at a training camp.

“The sea is such a pretty blue color. And this place really is deserted.”

“I didn’t know Japan had a place like this.”

The beach stretched as far as the eye could see, yet strangely there wasn’t another human being in sight. Behind us was a two-story mansion with room for around twenty people; the kind of place I’d

never seen outside of movies. It was plenty big and plenty beautiful, so it surprised me that it was being used as nothing more than a holiday home. If only we had some kind of sports to be training for here, we could get our own anime series.

"It's only natural that there aren't any other tourists around," I said.

I was with Ozu getting our stuff out of the trunk. I glanced at the other car that pulled up in the parking lot after us. It was a foreign-made red convertible, with a low suspension and sleek design. It gave off a sense of fashionable maturity. Since fewer young people drove, that was a rarity these days. Canary stepped out of it with a flourish as the wind played with her long, golden hair. She took off her sunglasses and narrowed her eyes, a gesture that was so glamorous I started wondering whether we were being filmed.

"Because this is her private beach."

"Anyone within ten feet of her can sense just how successful she is, huh?" Ozu said.

"If a company's assets counted towards disposable income, Tsukinomori-san would have her beat. Since they don't, I reckon she's even richer than him."

"Do in-house editors really make that much?" Ozu asked.

"I don't think that's it." I shook my head.

Iroha came up to us, apparently attracted by the talk of money. "Don't all those hits earn her mega cash?"

"They earn the *company* mega cash, and any salary she earns from the company is gonna have an upper limit. You might be looking at, say, ten million yen a year if you worked for one of the big names, but that's not gonna be enough to keep a private beach."

"*Ten million*?! That already sounds like a ton! So how much *do* you need to earn in a year to keep a private beach? A hundred million?!"

"Dunno. If I had to guess, even that doesn't sound like enough."

"Seriously?"

"I get you," Ozu said. "A hundred million would probably just about cover the management costs and reserve funds, and if that's all you can afford, there'll be better things to spend your hundred million on. More *efficient* things, as Aki would say."

"If you had five hundred million, you'd have enough to spend on frivolous things, but even then a private beach might be pushing it," I agreed. "Especially one this big."

"You guys *are* teenagers, right?" Iroha said. "You have way too much money sense..."

Iroha seemed utterly unimpressed by our serious financial talk. Also, this wasn't so much about "money sense" as economics, but now I'm nitpicking.

And yeah, we were teenagers. So why hadn't we been taught about economics and how to use money? It would be a much more efficient way to prepare us to be better members of society. Was there someone who benefited from the younger generation lacking that knowledge? Eh, maybe it'd make sense if this was the result of such a person's quest for efficiency.

"But then how can Canary-san afford a super fancy villa and private beach if she's just an editor, Senpai?"

"She's not just an editor, is she? This is just a guess, but she probably makes most of her cash from her side hustles."

"Side hustles?"

"She started up all these projects to promote her writers, and they wound up bringing in lots of income. I had a look..." I opened up the list on my phone to show Iroha.

"Huh? A private online community with twenty thousand members, which costs eight hundred yen a month to join..."

"Making her sixteen million yen a month."

"Whoa! And her CDs make it into the Oricon top 10 every month when her books release..."

"I did a quick calculation, and she's looking at around twenty million yen in royalties a month there."

"Twenty... Wait, she does commercials too?!"

"Approximately fifteen million yen a month, calculated from this company's performance fees for independent talents."

"I think my brain's melting."

"With all this, she'll be making a little over fifty million a month, which comes out to six hundred million a year. If we add on her live appearances, royalties from the essays she writes, and all the other—"

"Let's not! I get it! Canary-san's a money-making machine!" Iroha clamped her hands over her ears and started singing to herself before I could keep going.

What I was describing was on a completely different level to the world she knew, and it sounded like her brain was rejecting it. The six hundred million figure itself didn't surprise me; that was how much *Koyagi* was expected to make in a month if it were picked up and published by Honeyplace Works. We were talking sales, though. To have six hundred million all to yourself blew my mind.

"You must really have taken a shine to me if you've been researching all of this so thoroughly!"

"Gah."

The (self-proclaimed) seventeen-year-old pushed past Iroha to force herself into the conversation.

Canary fluttered her eyelashes and smiled coyly at me. "You could've just asked me yourself, you know, instead of doing something

so bird-brained. I would have told *you*. My heart, my body, my wallet... Just say the word, and I'll open up any of them for you, chirp!"

"Isn't it kinda bad that you're playing favorites as an idol?"

"Owie, stop pecking on me! Every fan is my favorite, chirp!"

"That sounds like an excuse...so why is it so heartwarming, dammit?"

Her eyes were big and round. Her body was petite with all the right curves and proportions. Nerds would probably deify her as a loli with tits. Hearing her sugar-sweet voice coming out of that body'd send the front row of her live audience hopping into the air like drowning fish.

"I mean it. I'm not hiding anything, so just ask and I'll tell you, chirp!"

"She's telling the truth. Canary-san's totally open with her earnings to anyone. Everyone in the editing department knows how much she's making."

"Mashiro."

Up until now, Mashiro had been staring at the ocean, entranced. At some point, she'd ended up opposite Iroha and Canary—well, next to me—without me noticing. I almost forgot Canary was her editor. They'd probably already spoken about this sort of stuff before.

"Watch your words! You're making it sound like I fly my mouth every chance I get! But I *don't*! People flock around me to ask, and I don't have the heart to disappoint them, chirp!"

"Are you sure that's a good idea? If the other editors learn you're makin' so much more than them, won't they get mad?"

Japanese culture was all about conformity. Anyone who stuck out would have trouble navigating society. The same used to be true for Ozu too. So how come Canary got away with that sort of behavior at work?

"Chirp?" Canary looked at me like I'd grown an extra head and tilted her head sweetly to one side. "Do you think gigolos have the right to 'get mad' at their benefactors?"

"Gigolos?"

"Oh, I'm speaking in metaphors of course, chirp! I wouldn't wanna have any *real* gigolos."

"Um, I still don't get it."

"The works I'm in charge of are UZA Bunko's golden egg! They make up ninety percent of sales, chirp! The other editors aren't in any position to squawk at me!"

"Ninety percent?!"

Whoa. No wonder she could get away with anything. Canary's personality was questionable, but her achievements were rock solid.

It'd be easy to mistake her for a kid by appearance alone, but behind that overly cutesy seventeen(?) -year-old was a godlike Stand. And this was the rival I was fighting with for Makigai Namako-sensei's time.

"Conformity's place in Japanese companies is nothing more than ancient chicken scratch these days! I'm taking my cues from the wider world, chirp!"

"I get it! People should be judged based on their achievements, right?!" I couldn't help but get excited at Canary's words.

Mashiro's expression hardened beside me. Her next words were scathing. "I wouldn't take her that seriously if I were you. She has this dumb idea in her head that she's some kind of Hollywood star. She practically worships America."

"Squawk!" The color drained from Canary's face. "Wh-Why would you say that, Mashiro-chirp?"

"I don't want Aki to get any weird ideas from you. I already know about your dream of becoming a Hollywood producer. A dream that was destroyed when you suffered a crushing defeat at your English conversation scho—"

"Stoooooop right there, chirp! Do you want me to turn to ashes right here and now?! I'm warning you, I won't be reborn, chirp!"

"You stole that cheap idea just now from one of the big-wigs at Imperial Books, one of the industry's biggest companies!"

"I stole it?! At least say I borrowed it, out of respect! Why're you being so mean to me, chirp?! I'm letting you use my private villa, all 'cause you said you wanted to go to the beach, chirp!"

"Th-Thank you... But that can't be the only reason you brought us here." Mashiro narrowed her eyes.

"U-Urgh..." Canary looked away and began to whistle. She was stupidly good at it.

I didn't know what they were on about, but it was clear from the way they interacted that they got on really well. It was enough to warm my heart. They seemed to have the stability of a pair working on a long-running series together. Perhaps it was her skill in fostering relationships that made Canary such a successful editor.

"I *am* happy to hear you trash talk Imperial Books like that, though, chirp!"

"Imperial Books?" I echoed. "Are they that big a deal, Mashiro?"

I wasn't an expert in light novels or anything, so I didn't know much about the industry. I knew the names of the most famous publishers, including Imperial Books, but that was about the extent of it.

"After hearing about Canary-san's achievements, her financial position, and how many copies of Makigai Namako-sensei's work have been printed, I doubt any other company would even come close to—"

“Idiot.” It had been a long time since Mashiro insulted me right to my face like that.

“S-Sorry. Clearly I gotta do more research. I don’t know anything about the publishing world.”

“Think about it like this. Most editors at publishing companies have a really impressive educational back—”

“Really?” Iroha leapt into the conversation, her eyes sparkling. “Is that the same for you, Canary-san? Wait, don’t tell me you went to the University of Tokyo or somewhere?!”

A smug smile rose to Canary’s lips. “Oopsie! Looks like I’ve been found out, chirp! I hate to be a proud little peacock, but I don’t wanna be a lyrebird either! Yep, chirp! I graduated from the University of Tokyo, chirp!”

“Imagine boasting about going to the best school in the country!” Iroha laughed. “She really is more annoying than me!”

“Annoying, yes. *More* annoying than you? Hmm.” I paused. “I think you guys are too different to be sure.”

Mashiro’s lip curled. “Kind of funny to hear you brag about your education, Canary-san, when it wasn’t enough to get you into Imperial Books.”

“Wha...?”

“Guuuuh!”

“C-Canary-san?! You okay?! She’s still smirking but her lip’s bleeding!” Iroha cried, holding up Canary’s body.

Canary trembled, and it was clear she was working hard to keep that confident smile on her pale face. “I-I’m fine, chirp. I just bit on my lip because I was so frustrated and nicked it, chirp!”

“That doesn’t look fine at all!” Iroha said.

Mashiro’s face was perfectly composed as she continued. “Imperial Books has the money to hire the greatest minds in the industry. They have a producer who graduated from Stanford and produced global hit after global hit in Hollywood. A psychologist who graduated from Yale and who is called the founder of modern marketing. A former agent who graduated from Oxford and who was behind the publishing of a world-renowned series from the UK about a magical academy. These are just some of the people who make up their editorial department, and the company exclusively hires graduates from the world’s top ten universities.”

“They’ve gotta be the Google of the publishing world...”

I already knew the publishing industry was an impressive one. What I didn’t know was that the novel industry was made up of such talented people.

“Caw! Hearing it all again makes it feels like my heart’s gonna burst outta its birdcage! Everyone! I’m heading inside, chirp! I gotta

get to work buffing up the manuscript Makigai-sensei just sent me, chirp!”

“H-Hey!” Mashiro reached out for Canary, who was rolling her arms and bouncing off towards the villa.

Huh? What did Canary just say?

“Makigai Namako-sensei’s manuscript?” I echoed.

“You heard right, chirp! He finally hatched out the first draft of the new installment of *Snow White’s Revenge Classroom*. How’s that for a coincidence?! Chirp!”

“C-C-Canary-san!”

“Hummingbird in your bonnet, Mashiro-chirp? I’m happy as a lark from hearing you put me down, and it’s making my mouth move all by itself! I’m not dropping any hints about anything, chirp!”

“Trash... You’re trash...”

“Speak up! Think of this as round two, now that you can’t keep your manuscript from me anymore, chirp!”

“Why are you mad, Mashiro? And wait, you said Makigai Namako-sensei submitted his manuscript? So—”

“Put two and two together, featherbrain! Mashiro-chan is Maki—”

“Makiri!”

“You mean the sake?!”

Sumire suddenly showed up out of nowhere and thrust her hand over Canary’s mouth. Why? I couldn’t tell you.

“Oh, I’ve had a massive craving for Makiri since we got here. I bet you’ve got a ton of booze hidden away in that fancy villa! Let’s drink the night away, you and me, just the adults!”

“The sun’s still up,” I pointed out. “And didn’t Canary-san say she wanted to read—”

“Okay, I’ll drink alone, and Canary-san can get on with her work!”

“Shut it, you yellow-bellied tit! We only just got here, and you’re already talking about drinking, chirp! What do you think I invited you here for?!”

“Yeah, yeah! I promise I’ll swim! Just lemme see the booze first! Please?”

“Ugh, you’re so— Hey! Where d’you think you’re grabbing, chirp?! Squawk!”

Sumire flung her arm around Canary’s shoulders and started dragging her away. She shot Mashiro a quick wink. So quick, I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it.

“The hell just happened?”

“Wh-Who knows? Not me! Aha ha ha!” Mashiro let out a laugh that was uncomfortably dry.

Hmm...

“What were you gonna ask, Senpai?” Iroha asked, kindly

reminding me that there was something I had wanted to say before the adults started acting weird. Iroha could be thoughtful at times. At times.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I just thought if Makigai Namako-sensei’s just finished something up, it’ll be a good time to give him some more work from us.”

“What are you, a monster?”

“Die in a fire. Painfully.”

“Huh?”

What did I do to deserve *both* Iroha and Mashiro cursing me? When one task is done, it makes sense to move on to the next, doesn’t it?

Whatever. For now, we headed for the villa after Sumire and Canary, who was still having no luck getting away from our alcohol-obsessed teacher.

“We’re finally at the beach! Betcha can’t wait to see Iroha in her swimsuit.”

“You’d lose that bet.”

“Not if you were honest. I know my dear little sister’s cute, objectively speakin’.”

“Maybe if she weren’t so annoying.”

“The gods have spoken. That annoying attitude is part of what makes her cute.”

“You think annoyingness and cuteness can really co-exist?”

“You don’t?”

“...”



Iroha

SENPAI!! ♪



AKI

Yeah?



Iroha

How's the boys' room? Comfy? You doing Ozuma in there?



AKI

Stop trying to encourage Shikibu.



Iroha

I was kidding!



AKI

And change the group name. Right now it looks like I wrote it.



Iroha

It's totally what you'd name it, so don't sweat it!



AKI

It's too far-fetched. Give me the admin perms already...



AKI

Anyway, aren't you girls supposed to be getting changed? Why don't you talk to Mashiro and Sumire-sensei?



Iroha

I AM talking to them! I'm not a loner like you! I have good communication skills ☆



Iroha

Plus, I'm a girl! Talking while LIMEing is an essential skill!



AKI

You sound like an ad for one of those cheap mobile games.



Iroha

Lemme show you something nice ☆



AKI

Huh?



Iroha

Here!



AKI

Wa



AKI

atrear you stupid?



Iroha

It's really happening this time!



Iroha

This bikini just came out this summer!



Iroha

So happy you can't even speak, huh? You know I can see you're reading my messages?



Iroha

Ha ha ha! Can't wait to see each other on the beach!



Iroha

Look forward to it, Senpai ♪

Chapter 6: I Have It In for the Teenagers on the Beach!

“What’s the matter, Aki? Why’re ya slouching like that?”

“It’s nothing. No, siree. Nothing at all.” I shot Ozu my most reassuring smile (which probably didn’t reassure him of anything).

As if I was going to tell him the truth.

Ozu and I were here in the designated boys’ room in Villa Kanaria (that’s what I’m calling Canary’s villa), changing into our swimming trunks.

The outside of this place was impressive enough, but the inside was just like one of those incredible mansions you saw in American movies. White walls, white pillars, white couches and chairs... The ceilings had those weird propeller thingies, and out the windows was an unbroken view of the beach and sea. To really rub it in, there were even weird fish prints and deer heads on the wall.

We were keen to hit the beach, so the girls and the boys had headed into separate rooms to get changed. That was why I was currently topless and wearing only my swimming trunks. My defenses were low, and that was when Iroha decided to send me that image over LIME.

Calling it an act of terrorism was not an overreaction. It reminded me just how messed up I still felt after the Ceremony of Knots. If Iroha had sent me a picture like that before then, I’d probably have responded with a humorless “lol” and left it at that. Right now, though, it was making my heart run at double speed for some reason.

It was evident that by sending me a seductive, unsolicited image over LIME, she was trying to get a reaction out of me. It was behavior borne of a desire to annoy, which should have sapped every last drop of attractiveness out of that image. Unless, that was, I found Iroha’s actions...

No, no!

I shook my head to rid my mind of the fleeting notion.

Noticing my sudden movement, Ozu slid up next to me. “You’re not embarrassed to go out in your trunks, are ya? You shouldn’t be. You’re pretty buff.”

“No, that’s not— Hey, quit staring at me!”

“Your fault for havin’ a body that’s worth checking out,” Ozu said, studying my abs.

If I were a girl, that'd be sexual harassment.

"I work out a little just to keep myself in good shape, that's all. Getting sick's a massive waste of biological resources. You should keep yourself healthy too, or you'll end up dying too young."

"Yeah..." Ozu scratched at his cheek awkwardly.

Ozu wasn't really that muscular, but it wasn't like he was fat either. His skin was pale, smooth like a dolphin's, and he possessed that peculiar charm that a lot of slender handsome guys like him had. He looked perfect in his trunks. Just needed a little more health awareness.

"I wouldn't look like this if you didn't pester me every day, Aki. You remember how bad I was before, right?"

"You admit it, so now it's time to make some improvements. Though I gotta admit you're doing way better than during your period of self-neglect."

"Right?"

"Stop fishing for compliments. You should be improving yourself for the sake of your longevity."

"Aha ha ha! Sure thing, dad!"

"Stop it. I already have to act like a dad herding his kids on vacation with Iroha and Mashiro. If you start too, I'm seriously gonna end up aging at double speed."

"Don't sweat it, Aki. You're still plenty young. Young enough to get excited over Iroha in a swimsuit."

"Wha—"

"You were looking at your LIME chat with her just now, right?"

"Gngh..."

"I know Iroha, and I know she wouldn't miss a chance like this to mess with you."

I couldn't believe he worked out all of that from mere observation. This was why I hated overly perceptive people.

Ozu studied my face thoughtfully. "Have you noticed yet, Aki?"

"N-Noticed what?"

"How attractive Iroha is?"

"I'll admit that she's good looking. And that she has a nice smile."

"What about her personality?"

"Put it this way. The only reason everyone at school likes her is because she's hiding who she really is."

Iroha was always hyper and annoying towards me (and only me) whenever she got the chance, but that wasn't what she was like at school. At school she was an honor student, one armed with a pure, refreshing smile that never faded. She was kind and sweet, someone who treated and spoke to everyone with an equal amount of friendly cheeriness.

That was the girl most people thought of when they heard the name Kohinata Iroha, and I was well aware of that.

"I'm not talkin' about *that* Iroha," Ozu said.

"What d'you mean?"

"You don't think Iroha's cute when she's in annoying mode?"

I stared at him, my mouth hanging open. "Huh?"

What was he talking about? Iroha was cute when she was annoying? Next he'd be telling me extra-fatty ramen was good for my health.

"She's so nice and kind to everyone, but you're the only one she can be herself with. You're the only one she likes to annoy. Think about the kinda nerds you get these days; I think that sort of thing would rank pretty highly with them."

"Cute and annoying, you mean? The archetype that's getting more common these days?"

"Yeah, that. It's really popular, y'know."

"Hmm. I mean, I know there's demand for that kinda personality type through my research. But it only really applies to fictional characters."

"That's rich, comin' from the guy who taught me how to communicate using dating sims."

"Hey, I was desperate!"

I'd already tried everything without any success. The only thing that worked were those dating sims. I wasn't the kind of guy who got his fiction mixed up with reality.

"When it comes to manga or anime, you've always got the protagonist standing in between you and the fictional world. They're the ones who suffer all the teasing, and it's always obvious to the reader or the watcher that the heroine's doing it out of affection, which makes the teasing less annoying. Reality's not like that."

Let's be real. Who *liked* being teased?

...Maybe masochists, but that was about it.

"Don't get me wrong; I'm happy Iroha can be herself, and I don't mind taking the hit instead of you or Otohara-san. But she's definitely annoying. But hey, if that's all I gotta put up with to be able to get the Alliance members' talents recognized, that's fine. It's just..."

"It's not cute?"

"It's not. I mean, no disrespect to her, but I don't really see it as attractive."

"Have you *ever* felt attracted to her?"

"I don't think so."

I couldn't say for certain. I didn't even know what to call the weird feelings I had had towards Iroha back in Kageishi Village.

"Do you think she could be attracted to you?"

“Not really. It wouldn’t make sense with the way she behaves.”

“How’s that?”

“If the annoying Iroha is who she really is, then there’s no way she thinks of me romantically.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“If she liked me, she’d want to present herself to me in a favorable light. Maybe she wouldn’t care anymore if we’d been together for years and years, but we’re not even dating. She’s not scared to show me who she really is; proof that she doesn’t see me in that way at all.”

“Yeah, you’ve explained this to me before. Y’know, you might be onto something.”

“Right?”

“Yup, it makes total sense. Or it would, if we were talking about any normal pair.”

“Meaning?”

“If you’ve got yourself a relationship where everything’s warped, then the romantic expression would come out weird too, right? You might take all those anomalies at face value, but when it comes to the romance aspect, you’d find it impossible to use them to make objective judgments.”

“You couldn’t make it sound more complicated, could you?”

I wasn’t about to deny the importance of supposition. Supposition was the origin of every discovery and invention of mankind. But it was important to realize that the exploration of a supposition required both risk and time. Not to mention that it was difficult to experiment when it came to human relationships. Maybe if I was an all-knowing god who could read Iroha’s every thought—but I wasn’t.

“C’mon. Stop wasting my stuff with weird nonsense and let’s go,” I said.

“Yes, sir. Oh! Wait, I gotta make sure I don’t leave this behind!”

“Leave what behind?”

Ozu lifted up some crumpled plastic and an air pump, and scratched his cheek awkwardly. “My inner tube. I’m not a fan of water.”

“Huh. I wouldn’t have expected that of you.”

That was Ozu: a genius engineer with dashing good looks, peppered with the weakness of being a poor swimmer, which did just enough to remove any chinks in his charm. It was with that best friend of mine that I left the room to head to the beach.

The girls were still changing by the time we got to the beach, so Ozu and I chilled out and whittled away the time under a parasol. Ozu leaned back as far as his reclining beach chair would take him,

whistling as he tapped on his phone. He wasn't just playing around, though; I was surprised to find out he was putting together a prototype for a new online service. He'd started programming on his phone lately instead of his PC, and was using the portability to his advantage to amuse himself by creating something new.

Truth be told, some of the apps he made in his spare time had a pretty decent market value. Since we didn't have the personnel in the Alliance to manage or maintain them, they remained unpublished. I suggested he might want to launch them and then sell them on to large companies if they got popular or something, but Ozu said he didn't want to sell his creations to someone and let them get ruined, so I respected his decision.

While Ozu worked away on his phone, I sat next to him and let my mind wander. This beach had a great view, and must've cost a fortune, so it seemed a shame that no one could use it when Canary wasn't around. Keeping out the general public was what kept it so serene, so if Canary sold access at a premium and labeled it a "luxury experience," while keeping the beach up to this standard, she could probably make some pretty good cash. Or she could set up a subscription service which allowed a certain number of visits every month. Charging more would get her a higher quality of visitor, so she wouldn't need to hire any security or anything, making a plan like that very cost effective. I felt like the demand would be there, since there was a growing number of people who preferred to live minimalistically and didn't buy land even if they could afford it.

Anyway, that was the kind of useless stuff I was thinking about. And yeah, I know full well this isn't what most guys my age think about when they come to the beach. But I couldn't help it. I mean—*guargh!*

"Aha ha ha ha! 'Guargh!'"

"Nnngh..."

As I was enjoying my leisurely stroll through businesslike thought, a crude laugh assaulted my ears and totally ruined the mood. I writhed and clutched at my stomach, while the watermelon that had been dropped on top of it rolled to the ground.

"B-Bitch... That's the worst way to make an entrance I've ever seen!"

"Ah ha ha! I'm doing you a favor, Senpai! I'm making sure your tolerance to watermelons is high enough so ours don't totally knock you out!"

"Watermelons? What?"

"I'm talking badonkers, Senpai!"

"Wh—You...!" I almost squirmed on reflex just hearing that word come out of her mouth, but I forced myself to stay still. And then I

slowly, slowly raised my head.

If Iroha was here, that meant—

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting...Aki.”

“We’re here! Okay, you can look at my swimsuit as much as you want, just lemme see you boys in your trunks too!”

Mashiro was squirming bashfully as she approached, while Sumire looked like she was having the time of her life. I stiffened at the sight of all three of them.

Let’s start with Mashiro.

Her swimsuit was blue and white, completed by a see-through skirt. I think it’s called a pareo. While the swimsuit was relatively modest, the smooth skin of her shoulders and her cute belly button were definitely attractive enough to catch the eye of any passing male, and with her usual seashells earrings, she reminded me of a siren. A true seducer of seamen.

Sumire... Eh, I don’t have to describe hers. She was wearing the same bikini from when we were trapped in the changing room together. That’s all you need to know.

And now, Iroha, the girl who thought provoking people by sending swimsuit pics over LIME was funny. The girl who would definitely pick the most revealing bikini to present her perfect proportions to charm any and every guy out there.

“What, you thought I’d be wearing a bikini? Sorry, but I’m in a rash guard!”

“You... You’re...”

She was kidding, right? After I went through all that effort to align my mind and expectations with that of the average guy! I mean, the thing had a hood and everything! I stared at her, dumbfounded. I could only watch as she brought a hand to her mouth and snickered.

“How come you look so disappointed, Senpai? Don’t tell me you had your hopes up!”

“Course not.”

“No?”

“Also, what the heck was that picture you sent me on LIME?”

“Oh, I’m wearing a bikini too. Just underneath this thing.”

I’d seen protagonists in manga series about gambling crying out that they’d been tricked while running their hands over their heads, but this was the first time I’d actually understood what that felt like.

“You sent him...a picture of your bikini?”

Why was *Mashiro* getting upset and holding her head in her hands now? Maybe something happened? Who knows.

I suddenly remembered something. I looked down at Iroha’s feet—she was wearing flip-flops, and her ankle was wrapped in tight bandages.

“Now I get it. Does it still hurt?”

“Oh, you finally noticed?”

“I forgot. Sorry.”

“Heh heh! Aren’t we honest? But nah, it doesn’t really hurt anymore.”

“Good. Guess you won’t be swimming, though.”

“Yeah, I don’t want the seawater getting in. But I’m up for some beach volleyball!”

“Don’t make any daring plays.”

“Ha ha! You’re always so sweet when I’m hurt or sick, Senpai! Maybe I’ll keep these bandages on even after I’m healed!” Iroha grinned.

“That sounds like a slippery slope to me.”

Suddenly my phone, which I’d been charging on the parasol, started buzzing. I unlocked it to find Mashiro had sent me a photo of herself in her bikini over LIME.

“What did you send me this for, exactly?”

“Y-You shouldn’t bring up private LIME conversations in front of other people. That’s just too rude!” Mashiro’s phone almost slipped out of her hand, and she just about managed to catch it before she started glaring at me.

“Are you *trying* to start an argument?”

“Sh-Shut up. Don’t reply out loud. Or do, and die.”

“Sure...”

Was she feeling competitive because of the photo Iroha sent me? I understood sending the photo out of jealousy because of her feelings for me, but I didn’t get why this had to turn into a contest.

“Quit hogging, Aki! Those bikini shots’ll be great reference material! Send them over right now, por favor!” Sumire said.

“Oh, good point. Give me one sec—”

“Uh, you really about to send a private selfie to someone else there, Senpai?”

“Privacy. Look it up. Idiot.” Mashiro glared.

Sumire always asked me for reference materials, so I almost did it automatically. Apparently I’d made a mistake.

“S-Sorry. I thought Shikibu would be fine, seeing as she’s in the Alliance and all.”

“You gotta know how to deal with sensitive information if you wanna manage people, Senpai! You should probably get some training or something.”

“Fine, but did you also know it’s illegal to break into people’s houses without permission?”

“I have permission! You said I could come by whenever I wanted!”

“Yeah, when I’m there! Not when I’m out!”

I felt Mashiro bash her shoulder into my back. She was hiding behind me in silence while fiddling with something. The next second my phone buzzed again.

Mashiro: *This is so unfair! If you’ve given Iroha-chan a spare key, you should give me one too! I’m your girlfriend!*

“I didn’t give Iroha anything!”

“S-Stop replying to my LIME messages in real life!”

“This again? I know the only reason you gave the key to Ozuma was because you were too embarrassed to hand it over to me directly!”

“I’ve told you a million times, that’s not it!”

“Listen to Aki, Iroha-chan. If he says that’s not it, you should believe him,” Sumire said.

“Sumire-chan-sensei?”

“Sumire-sensei...” Mashiro said.

“Aki gave the key to Ozuma-kun, and that’s because—” Sumire stood between Iroha and me. A serene smile lit up her face and she patted us both on the shoulder like she was some saintly mother. “—he wanted his boyfriend to be able to come and go as he pleases.”

For fuck’s sake... Talk about a one-track mind.

“You guys just had to go off all at once the second we got here, didn’t you?” I sighed.

“Because you’re totally not hyped enough, Senpai! I mean, we’re at the beach!”

“Yeah, I know. Wait a sec. What was the deal with the watermelon, Iroha?”

“My watermelons?” Iroha cupped her hands to her chest and shied away.

“No! The watermelon you dropped on my stomach!” I pointed at the offending fruit on the sand.

“Oh, that?” Iroha picked it up and held it up to her face with a grin. “We’re doing what all teenagers do on the beach! Watermelon splitting! Thank God I’m here, huh? No other girl would wanna do this sorta thing with you, Senpai!”

“Shut it. Stop pestering me.” I turned my face away.

Iroha was being her normal self. Her actions, her words, her disregard for my personal space. It was everything I was used to. So why couldn’t I look her in the eye like I always did? Could *I* be the one who’s changed, and not her?

“Gah!” I suddenly found an elbow in my ribs and turned to find

Mashiro pouting at me.

“Aki... Stop flirting.” Her stare was mired with jealousy.

“What did you just say? I’m not doin’ anything like that...” I wasn’t even confident I was being honest. But even if I was, I didn’t expect Mashiro to believe me through her Aki-tinted glasses.

“Hmph.” She turned away pointedly.

I couldn’t help but let out a sigh. I knew I was being cruel. I’d rejected Mashiro’s confession, and while being fully aware she still had feelings for me, I’d started trying to work out what these strange feelings I was having towards Iroha were. That was a terrible thing to do to Mashiro. My rejection should have been clear enough on that night. If I did anything else to rub it in, it would just hurt her even more.

I was just glad Mashiro wasn’t technically in the Alliance. If she were, then depending on what these feelings I had for Iroha were, I could end up destroying everything. If *my* feelings and *my* behavior were what destroyed the Alliance, then there’d be no way to pick up the pieces.

Mashiro wasn’t in the Alliance. That was the only saving grace of this situation.

After that, we enjoyed the beach together, all the while knowing that it wasn’t like us to engage in the frivolities of youth. First up was watermelon splitting.

“This way, Senpai! Yup! Keep going! Straight ahead!”

“S-Stop trying to lead him to you! No, Aki! Go left. Left!”

“You’re doing the exact same thing! Right, Aki! Right is where you’ll find paradise!”

“What, where Ozuma’s standing?!”

“If you guys are that thirsty, grab some water. You know who you should trust here, right, Aki? Just keep walkin’ forward, okay?”

“That’s not fair! That’s two of you leading him to Iroha-chan! Sumire-sensei, can you go on my side?”

“Who, me?!”

“Shikibu.”

“G-Gotcha! Left, Aki! It’s totally left!”

“Okay, but where the hell’s the *watermelon*?!” I cried out from under my blindfold.

Next up, we played some beach volleyball.

“It’s not like this is important or anything, but when you’re diving for the ball, Senpai, you look like a cosplay photographer trying to get an upskirt shot. It’s pretty funny.”

“You’re right, that’s *not* important! Focus on the game! I only *just* saved that last shot, y’know!”

“You just want me to jump so you can peek at my butt under the rash guard. You’re such a perv, Senpai!”

“Focus! Look, now’s your chance for a spike!”

“Yeah, yeah. This’ll be a piece of cake. Take...that!”

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! It’s a spike one-point-nine meters back and to your right! And it’s comin’ in at a seventy-seven-point-six-degree angle!”

“Got it! Thanks to your perfect calculations, I can get—hnyah!”

“She fell.”

“She totally fell.”

“Oooh... The math was perfect, but the body was weak. If only I exercised more...”

“You completely wasted my simulations, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei...”

“Eep.”

“Aww. There’s a tiny hermit crab here riding the waves. How cute!”

“Uh, Mashiro? You’re supposed to be the referee. You need to be watching the game...”

The final scores were probably made up, but it was fun all the same.

After that, we built some sandcastles.

“I did it! Whaddya think of Cinderella’s castle?!”

“Woow, Sumire-chan-sensei! That’s too awesome!”

“Wow. Even the tiny ornaments are perfect...”

“Huh. I knew you were good at 2D art, but I didn’t realize you could also work in 3D. She’s impressive, right, Aki?”

“Yeah, this is great. I’m actually really surprised, Sumire-sensei. Have you been working on new skills for your future?”

“Heh, it’s just a little thing I’ve been working on for fun. Y’know, making some 3D models of my favorite characters to put into lewd MMDs. Oh, by the way, this castle is from a shota yaoi series called *Cinderella Is a Femboy!*”

“Talk about commitment. Shotacons sure are terrifying.”

“Hold up a sec. So you’ve been doing your teaching work, while doing art for us, *and* you’ve been making MMDs on the side? Where d’you find the time?”

“Eep.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been neglecting your illustrations to make these MMDs?!”

“Uuugh... I just think it’s important to work on the stuff you want!

All I wanted was a 3D shota model I could do anything with! I will not be made to feel guilty for living my best life! In fact, I'm proud to have created something so lewd that the official creators would barely dream of! I have no regrets for pursuing the shota-lover's path!"

"The truth comes out. On your knees."

"You weren't listening at all, were you?!"

"I'm gonna be putting these stones on your lap one at a time. That should be nothing considering the self-sacrifice you've shown for your 'shota-lover's path.'"

"But that's actual torture! Mashiro-chan! H-Help!"

"Hang in there, Sumire-sensei..."

"Ow, the betrayal!"

I raked Sumire over the coals for her defiance, while also considering how her newly revealed talent might benefit us.

At any rate, our fun day at the beach was over before we knew it. To any third party who might've been watching us, it must've looked like we were having the time of our lives and making the most of our youth, just like any other group of teenagers. That was how close to "normal people" our day was. I guess that's exactly why I felt like I did. That was exactly why I couldn't enjoy the day from the very bottom of my heart.

Even as I played and chatted with everyone, I still couldn't get rid of those weird feelings I had towards Iroha, nor the immense guilt I felt towards Mashiro that seemed to gnaw at me every thirty seconds. Iroha, Mashiro, Sumire, and Ozu... They were all enjoying their time here to the fullest. So why was I insisting on being so annoying?

I hated it. It was so inefficient.

"I think it's good that you're seriously considering your relationships with Iroha and Tsukinomori-san."

"You're not helping by encouraging it, y'know."

"I'm just givin' everyone what they want."

"Oh, yeah? I guess I'll give it some more thought then."

"That's what I like to hear. Just don't get all depressed over it."

"I'll do my best."

Chapter 7: Mashiro's Editor Has It In for Me!

It was evening by the time we were tired out from playing on the beach. We headed back to the villa to shower, change, and grab some dinner. What was waiting for us was a whole range of overly fancy dishes. Sushi you could practically see the freshness coming out of, white fish carpaccio, boiled splendid alfonso, grilled clams and lobster, and at the very center of the table was a huge, majestic crab. It was a spread of every kind of seafood you could ever imagine—and then some.

“This is gonna be the best meal ever...” Mashiro gulped.

“I thought this place was just a villa, but turns out it's a *palace*!” Iroha said. “Mind if I eat, like, all of it?!”

“This is the kinda food that pairs *perfectly* with genuine Japanese sake! Canary-san knows her stuff!”

Mashiro, our designated seafood master, was a given, but even Iroha and Sumire could barely contain their excitement at the jaw-dropping feast in front of us. Meanwhile, the thought of how much this must've cost versus how few people it was feeding was making my head spin.

“Heh heh! What do you think of my most favoritest caterers, the Beachside Buffet, chirp?” Canary puffed out her chest.

“I'm impressed you managed to get all of this ready at such short notice,” Ozu said with a nod.

She wagged her finger at him. “I even managed to finish checking over Makigai-sensei's manuscript on top of that.”

“Seriously?! That was quick!” I said.

“That much is duck soup for a genius editor like me! Still, if I get the feedback to Makigai-sensei before he's even got time to rest, he won't thank me, so I'll hold back on passin' it over till the date changes, chirp.”

“That's not even six hours away...”

She made it sound like she was doing Makigai Namako-sensei a favor, but a mere six hours wasn't going to do much to improve an insane schedule. Those grievances aside, I honestly respected her. Even at maximum efficiency, it took me six hours to read and give feedback on a 200kb (that's around the length of a shortish book) scenario that Makigai Namako-sensei sent me. It was already past

three by the time we arrived at Canary's villa, and it had only been four hours since then.

Canary was so far ahead of me. How was I ever supposed to catch up to her?

Anyway, it was a time for enjoying ourselves, not for getting caught up in the serious stuff. The first thing to get this party started was to raise a glass. Iroha and Mashiro offered to pour me some of Canary Villa's treasured fresh tomato juice, which I gratefully accepted.

"Every birdie got a drink?"

"I sure do!"

Commenting on the fact that a certain somebody was holding up an entire bottle rather than a single glass would be more trouble than it was worth, so I kept my mouth shut.

Canary swept her gaze over us to make sure we all had a drink and then snapped her fingers. "Okey dokey! Let's get started, chirp!"

"Started?"

"Chirp! Start the music!"

What came next was a bubblegum beat that seemed to strip away at my IQ with every note. Canary fluttered around in a dance and hopped up to Mashiro in time with the music.

"Before we raise a glass, we gotta do some introductions for our stylish, non-feathered friends, chirp! As you all know, this chick is Mashiro-chan! A little shy, a little sharp, a little solitary, but her literary talent can't be beat! She's such a good girl that she worked on her manuscript instead of going on a fun trip with her pals, chirp! Let's keep supporting each other, Mashiro-chan!"

"Huh? Wait. What's happening?" Mashiro stared in bewilderment, but Canary had already moved on to her next target.

She grabbed said target's bottle in time to the music and poured some of its contents gracefully into a sake cup. "Here we have the 05th Floor Alliance's ace artist! Murasaki Shikibu-san, was it? Oh, excuse me! Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! She rustles up all sorts of lewd, intricate pictures of boys, girls, and handsome men, chirp! She's still got a far way to fly to reach our standards, but we might come and commission you one day! Let's be friends forever!"

"You're praising me, right?! Aww, shucks!" Sumire grinned and downed the contents of her sake cup. The contents that, I believed, she was supposed to be saving for the toast.

Next, Canary twirled her way over to Ozu. "Here we have our genius engineer, chirp! OZ! AKA Kohinata Ozuma-kun! He may look sweet and carry all the sexy charm of a young office lady, but give him a task or ten and he'll have them all bashed out in seconds! He's still hiding a ton of secrets under that plumage! Secrets I wanna pluck

out! Let's get to know each other, chirp! Nice and slow!"

"Thanks. You won't find any secrets here, though." Ozu smiled and shrugged. It'd be hard to tell if he was serious or joking if you didn't know him as well as I did.

Not pausing to work it out, Canary spun around right towards me this time. "Sorry to keep you waiting, head honcho, Ooboshi Akiteru! The man who acts as everybody's carer and pocket watch! How much efficiency will it take to make the flowers of your dreams bloom? As the man in a struggle with me for Makigai-sensei's time, he's my rival, chirp! Can we be friends? I'd sure be happy if we could, chirp!"

"Me too—and I mean that."

For a split second, Canary dropped her candy charade and fixed me with the sharp glare of a mountain lion. She was challenging me as an adult. My response was polite and inoffensive, and she left me with nothing but a suggestive smile before moving on to the next guest.

But then she stopped.

"Brrr..."

At the end of her sight sat Iroha, wagging an invisible tail and trembling in excitement. It was obvious that she couldn't wait to see how spectacularly Canary planned to introduce her.

But Canary stayed silent.

"Brrr..."

"..."

"Brrrrrr..."

"....."

"Brrrrrrrrrr..."

"....."

"Brrrrrrrrrr...rrr?"

"Sorry, but I don't have a clue who you are, chirp."

"Owwwww!"

"I *am* sorry! Chirp! Mash—Makigai-senai is the one I get my info on the 05th Floor Alliance from. Don't know much about anyone outside it, apart from a couple of names and a handful of personality traits."

"Hmph! Gimme back my dashed hopes!"

"Oooh, please forgive me! I promise I'll give you a wonderful present later to make up for it, chirp!" Canary slapped her hands together and shot Iroha a sparkling wink.

Even Iroha was forced to back down when faced with an impish gesture like that. She harrumphed through pouty lips, but still managed a "Fine..."

If only Canary had planned ahead, huh?

"Anyway! Let's raise a glass to our wonderful friends!"

“To our friends!”

And so began our evening banquet at Canary’s villa.

“You should know that Cthulhu isn’t about glorifying sea monsters.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s like how cheeky shota switches are the best kind!”

“It’s a tale created from Lovecraft’s hatred and fear towards sea creatures...”

“Right, right. I get why it might be controversial to switch the top and bottom around.”

“It’s the complete opposite of my—um, Makigai Namako’s work, which is based on his undying love for sea creatures.”

“Yeah, with any doujinshi, you’re going to get the author’s personal preferences mixed in, so it’s important to value them all equally.”

“All the one-star reviews are coming from people who can’t even see something so simple...”

“People go absolutely crazy with their criticisms online!”

“I hate people who act like they’re experts!”

“People who act like they’re experts are the worst!”

“I’ve never seen such a mismatched conversation end on the same note, chirp!”

“This is how they both get when they’re drunk,” Ozu explained. “Oh, but Tsukinomori-san isn’t drunk on booze! She’s drunk on the atmosphere.”

I was out on the lounge balcony enjoying the cooler air as those snippets from the worst conversation known to mankind reached my ears. Once I had seen that everyone was enjoying themselves, I slipped out. I would’ve liked to have stayed, but I didn’t have the time. I leaned on the rails and stared out over the sea, mulling over my thoughts with my phone in hand.

I was trying to decide which new characters to introduce to *Koyagi: When They Cry*. If this trip had gone according to plan, we’d be home by now and I would be doing this there. But taking a detour to Kageishi Village and then coming here on top of that was starting to eat away at the time I had planned to work.

“My negotiations with Tsukinomori-san went well, I think, so now I just gotta make sure we keep our number of daily active users constant...”

The most important index for *Koyagi* was not our number of downloads. Of course, that was the main way the Alliance earned money to continue its activities, but although *Koyagi* was a mobile

game, it didn't have a gacha system. While that would've been the most efficient way to earn money, it wasn't the most efficient way to achieve my goals. Instead, our revenue came from ads, premium items, and character stories. Players could watch ads to revive themselves after they died, pay money to get maps, and pay for stories (i.e. the scenarios Makigai Namako-sensei wrote for us) revolving around both new and old free characters.

That said, I was fine with free-to-play players. We weren't aiming for immediate profits. We were aiming to earn fans. Fans with a strong devotion to the series. Simply turning a huge profit wouldn't be enough to outplay the industry giants. We were a team of five people. In order to impress Honeyplace Works, which was hundreds—maybe even thousands—times larger than us, we needed to create a solid IP that was wildly popular.

“A new character...”

In the past, I'd always discussed this sort of thing with Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, Makigai Namako-sensei, and Ozu. Based on those discussions, I'd come up with an idea then. But I wanted to find my inspiration somewhere else from the usual suspects. There was only so much variation you could get from picking the same brains all the time.

“Maybe I could base her on Canary-san? I mean, she's definitely a *character*, but... Nah. Better not.”

I dismissed the temptation almost as soon as it came to me. Character or not, she'd be too difficult to use. Coming up with her lines one by one would be a total pain.

At that moment, I felt the cold press of aluminum against my cheek.

“What do you want?”

“Thought you might be tired, Senpai. So I did the considerate thing and grabbed you a drink!”

“Blue Bull, huh? Does this stuff really work?”

“It sure does! 'Specially since I worked really hard using my super duper transformation abilities to make sure it tastes good!”

“It tastes good anyway, doesn't it?”

Iroha was back to her usual levels of teasing—that was, levels insane enough to make the news. So I gave her the sensible comeback she'd expect. It was a huge relief.

I took the blue can from her, pulled the tab open, and took a swig. I let the addictive bursting of the bubbles over my tongue take me for a ride on the highway of taste for a moment while Iroha leaned back against the railing next to me.

“You've been actin' weird ever since...y'know. Has it been playing on your mind?”

“What’s ‘y’know’? And who’s acting weird?”

“And now you’re still trying to deny it! But I’m gonna drop the teasing for a bit. I just... How do I put this? I guess, if it’s making you feel awkward, I’d rather you just forget about it,” Iroha mumbled, dropping her gaze.

I could feel myself growing a little hot as I remembered our time in the love shrine.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s got nothing to do with that.”

“But that’s when you started acting weird.”

“I’m just tired. That was a part of it, but there’s been a lot going on. You don’t need to worry. I’m still gonna lead the Alliance, and I’m not gonna be abandoning anyone.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Stuff like this doesn’t usually ‘tire’ you out.”

“I’m human just like everyone else, y’know.”

“I dunno about that. You might wanna do some introspection. I mean, you’re working on your phone even now!” Iroha grabbed my phone from my hand.

“H-Hey!”

“If you’re hitting a wall, I can help you with some ideas. What kinda character are you looking for? Tsundere? Kuudere? A crazy girl? ...Huh?”

“It’s all right there.”

I had a simple word text editor open on my phone. There was a list of empty headings: name, gender, age, personality, appearance, and backstory.

“I don’t even know what I wanna do with this character yet. There’s no rush though; I’ve still got plenty of time to figure it out.”

“Gotcha...” Iroha gave my phone back and started playing with her fingers absentmindedly.

Five seconds passed, then ten, then fifteen... I recognized that habit. It meant she was thinking about something that was both difficult to express, and that she wasn’t sure she should be saying in the first place. If I said nothing now, she’d likely decide to drop it, so I decided to give her a little push to get things going.

“What’s up?”

“I can help come up with ideas for your new character.”

“Hey, where’d that come from?” I grinned. “Careful you don’t set some kinda death flag, acting so out of character like that.”

“You’re awful, Senpai! That’s a horrible thing to say!” Iroha puffed her cheeks out in an angry pout.

I knew she was trying to be kind, of course. That she’d thought carefully about what she could do for me, and that this was her answer. That was why there was only one response I could give.

“This is my job. It’s not right that I ask the voice actress to help with planning. Kinda puts me in an awkward spot.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“Huh?” I turned to look at Iroha, only now realizing that she’d slid down the railing at some point, and was now perched on the ground with one leg outstretched.

She stared at her toes. “Canary-san didn’t know who I was back there, right? But how would she?”

I waited for her to go on.

“I’m even keeping my work for the Alliance secret from my own brother, so of course I can’t be an official member. I’m just an anonymous voice actor. All the planning goes on in the Alliance group chat, so I can’t even join in with that. If it comes up in conversation when I happen to be around, I’ll throw some ideas out, but honestly, I don’t feel like I’m part of the development team at all.”

“If you want, I could bring you in as our ‘assistant.’ You’d be an official member then. We just need to come up with some way to explain it to Otoha-san if she finds out.”

“Nah, no thanks. I just feel like it’d be forcing us to tell more and more lies. I guess I just want to be able to say openly that I helped make something for the Alliance with you. All I’m after is the credit. Some creator I am, right?” Iroha smiled awkwardly and scratched at her cheek.

That look on her face didn’t annoy me. It was a look that told me she was worried her thoughts would never be heard—that she was prepared to lock them away if no one asked. It wasn’t annoying, but I wasn’t about to let her get away with it.

“‘Some creator I am’? There’s nothing wrong with just wanting credit! Just wanting to achieve something!” I said, raising my voice.

“Senpai?” Iroha’s tone lifted a little.

I was relieved. All she needed was a little distraction from the loneliness she felt of not being an official part of the Alliance.

“Planning for *Koyagi* isn’t easy, y’know.”

“Give it your all, no compromises. That kinda thing?”

“Yup. This character needs to be unique and lovable to everyone. If you’re in, you gotta show me a creative power that outstrips mine.” I plastered a smug smile on my face, and looked at her as if daring her to accept my challenge.

This much was necessary. She needed to be stirred up so that she could give this her all, and bring something that only she could to the project.

Iroha’s eyes widened for a split second, but then she smiled. “H-Hah! Sure you really want me to bring my A game?”

“Course I do. I want a character that’s fully fleshed out, not some

doodle on a bar napkin.”

“That’s it! I’m gonna show you up so hard with this new character! You’ll see! ‘Specially since you don’t have any experience with girls, so I bet you struggle to come up with any original female characters, huh?!” Iroha leapt to her feet.

“Your A game shouldn’t include insulting me!”

“Aha ha ha!” She started poking at my cheeks. It was annoying as all hell, but it was all part of how we communicated with each other.

Iroha and I were going to make up the time we lost in Kageishi Village by working together now. It smacked of the stereotypical spirit of youth which I hated so much, but objectively speaking, it was part of moving a little closer to my goals. I wasn’t about to complain this time around.

If this was some romantic comedy anime, you’d get a montage of Iroha and me slapping together a brand new character who turned out to be the best creation ever. Maybe something like that could happen if I was some kind of god of creativity. There was just one tiny thing we were forgetting.

This was no anime, manga, or light novel. This was real life. Anything, no matter how crazy, could happen at any time.

“Negotiations are complete, chirp! Your new character for *Koyagi: When They Chirp* will be created by yours truly, Canary-chan! Chirp!”

“Huh?”

“Um?”

With our new mission set firmly in our hearts, Iroha and I returned from the balcony. We’d barely made it three steps into the room when we heard a declaration that stopped us in our tracks. The cheerful chattering from before had dissipated into an awkward silence.

Sumire and Mashiro were sitting on the couch together. It was obvious they were trying to avoid looking at me, but even then, the guilt was written all over their faces. Ozu was grinning and tucking into some crabmeat—but there was definitely something more behind that grin than the delicious taste of his food.

The hell happened here?

Canary flicked her gaze between me and Iroha before breaking out into a smirk. “From *Koyagi*’s update schedule, I’ve noticed that it’s just about time for you to be developing a new character for the flock. Am I right, or am I right?”

“How did you...”

“Oh, you shouldn’t underestimate an editor like me, especially not when I’m a spectacularly spectacular idol to boot, chirp! It was a breeze to take the release schedule data and work backwards to find out what was going on behind the scenes from that, chirp!”

“U-Um, okay, but...”

“This is a great opportunity for you guys! I’ve already put the character’s background together and everything!”

“Wh...”

Canary showed me her phone. There it was: a character bio sheet laid out with perfect formatting.

“Her name’s Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, and she’s 204 years old. She’s a beautiful vampire who looks completely cold and merciless on the outside. Everyone’s scared of her because they think she’s super strong, invincible, *and* immortal, but the truth is she’s a coward. She won’t die of old age, but the same stuff that kills humans can kill her. She looks really intimidating, but the truth is she’s as jumpy as a flightless bird,” Canary read out from the document.

Did she draw that picture herself?

The image was rough, but it perfectly captured everything this character was supposed to be. Some illustrators might hate having every specification dictated to them like this, but it seemed she guessed correctly that my team wasn’t like that. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have gone so deep into the details. Because she did, there was no risk of our motivation dropping.

It was beyond perfect. Her character’s bio and its level of detail fit right into Koyagi’s world, the character herself was a breath of fresh air, and she had that double-sidedness which was sure to grab our users’ hearts. Everything Canary had presented me with was at an incredibly high level.

“Oh, Aki-kun! How about you let me take charge of everything about this character’s implementation—her art, her scenarios, and her toolkit? I promise it’ll all come out perfect, chirp!”

My eyes widened.

“H-He’s not gonna do that!” Iroha answered for me. “The 05th Floor Alliance is *Senpai*’s team!”

“What? But Ozzie, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and Makigai Namako-sensei already chirped their agreement!”

“When?!” Iroha demanded.

“You think I threw you this party for nothing? Business in this country doesn’t happen at meetings; it happens at gatherings like this, chirp!” Canary puffed out her chest proudly.

“Wait, *now* you wanna follow Japanese business practices?!” Iroha cried.

Yeah. Wasn’t she bigging up the western way of doing business before?

“You’re kidding, right? The Alliance would never betray their producer! Ozuma! Sumire-chan-sensei! Makigai Namako-sensei... Ugh! I don’t have his LIME so I can’t ask!”

“Oh, don’t expect *him* to get his feathers in a bunch over this. I know his fetishes. He’s gonna love this character, chirp.”

“C-Canary-san! Don’t say the f-word!”

Why was Mashiro getting flustered about us learning Makigai Namako-sensei’s tastes? Maybe it was just the implications of the word “fetish” she didn’t like.

“Why are *you* so against it, Iroha-chan? This is the best present you could ever wish for, chirp.”

“Wh-What does that mean?! How is this—”

“One week.”

“Huh?”

“This character’s illustrations, scenarios, and toolkit will be ready in a week. That’s way ahead of Aki-kun’s schedule, and this villa has every type of equipment needed to get the work done. While it’s all being worked on, you and Aki-kun will have plenty of time to yourselves to have fun together, chirp.”

“H-Huh?” Iroha’s fists hung aimlessly in the air as she turned to look at me. I didn’t know what she was expecting me to do about this.

“Welp, that’s that. Listen, Aki, you’re always pushin’ yourself so hard. The rest of the Alliance want you to relax now and then too.”

“Ozu...”

“I’m also doin’ this for rom-com purposes, by the way. I can’t take your side every time.” Ozu shot me his usual relaxed smile.

Mashiro hunched herself over slightly and held her head. “Uhh... Why can’t I spend my summer having fun with Aki?”

“You can, can’t you?”

“No, because—”

Sumire screamed. “Hold it right there, Mashiro-chan! This is about the manuscript you handed in yesterday, right?! The one with all those corrections! The one you’ll have to spend all week working on?!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. That.”

“You’re such a ditz, Mashiro-chan!”

I checked the 05th Alliance group chat. It seemed Makigai Namako-sensei was all up for Canary’s suggestion too.

“You’ve got no grounds to refuse, do you, Aki-kun?” Canary said.

Ozu, Sumire, and Makigai Namako, the Alliance’s main members, were all in. Canary’s character sheet was already flawless. If I left the decision up to logical and efficient thinking, there was no way I could refuse her proposal.

Kiraboshi Canary. There was a reason she proclaimed herself to be a super idol/editor. She understood her business partners perfectly, could identify what they wanted, and then use that to get her intended result. It was the most powerful play imaginable. It was like

her plans were perfected before she'd even thought of them.

But I didn't know what *she* wanted. What *she* got out of this. Was she planning to take the Alliance and the rights to it straight out of my hands? My goal was to maximize the Alliance's profits. So what should I do?

"You're sure you can get the character finished in a week?"

"Of course!" Canary looked me right in the eye as she shot me a salute. There was no hesitation in the gesture whatsoever.

"You know Murasaki Shikibu-sensei can't keep deadlines, right? I think a week might be a little unrealistic."

"Don't worry! There's never been a single illustrator who can outrun *me*!" This time she showed me a sideways peace sign—as if a week was *too much* time for the Alliance to produce the desired results while working under her.

Game development and fiction writing were two separate fields, and yet Canary wasn't even breaking a sweat at the thought of stepping into an unknown world.

She'd set everything up right down to the very last detail. I realized then that there was only one option available to me.

"All right, Canary-san. Please allow us to stay at your villa for an extra week."

"How's it feel to be sentenced to a week of lovey-dovey teasing?"

"I don't really have the headspace to think about that side of things right now."

"You're too worried about giving control of the new character over to someone else, right?"

"Nah, I dunno if I'd say '*worried*.' Doesn't matter who makes the character, as long as the process is efficient and we end up with a high-quality product to release to our audience."

"Even if you're not involved at all?"

"I guess, yeah."

"Y'know, that's just like the question you asked Midori-san back at the drama fair."

"Yeah. As long as the original party doesn't mind, I don't think there's a problem subbing someone else into their role, as long as they get results. That's why I was fine taking on Midori's role back then."

"Y'say you're not worried, but how come you sound worried?"

"Dunno."

Chapter 8: My Friend's Little Sister and I Have It In for Working Hard!

The next day was the first in Kokuryuun Kugetsu's official creation project. On a second viewing, the pristine white beach suddenly seemed dull and gray. The only sound was the waves against the shore. There were no voices to be heard, and Iroha and I were the only ones there. It felt like we'd been abandoned on a deserted island or something.

"There's no way it's gonna work! Catch."

"Nah, it'll be fine. I mean, she's a professional editor, right? Here, catch."

All of us had shared a breakfast prepared by the catering team this morning, and afterwards Canary, Mashiro, Sumire, and Ozu went off to work while Iroha and I came down to the beach.

"I know she said she could make any illustrator keep their deadlines, but that had to be a bluff. She's gonna see how terrible Murasaki Shikibu-sensei is, freak out, and then she'll give up right away! Catch."

"What're you getting all worked up for? That's not like you. Catch."

I threw the beach volleyball back at her again. It floated into the air with a soft bounding noise. To put it in more poetic terms, the ball swam through the air with the elegance of an angelfish, as Iroha and I played catch not only with the ball, but with our words.

"Whaddya mean? It's weirder that you're not freaking out about this. We were supposed to make the new character together! You and me! Then this woman, who's never even worked on a game before, shows up and takes the work from us! Catch!"

"Sure, that much is a shame. But Canary-san's plan was perfect. Ozu, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and Makigai Namako-sensei all said they were up for it, so you and me are outnumbered three to two. Fair's fair, and I wouldn't be happy going against the majority. Catch."

As Iroha's voice got louder, the pace of our game of catch sped up a little. I had to shift forward to return it to her.

"Hmph. Can't you just say you hold a hundred votes by yourself or something? That's the kinda crazy stuff they'd do in a rom-com. Catch!"

"I always try to make the best choice at any given time. I did the

same this time too. Whoa. How am I s'posed to catch that?"

Iroha threw the ball high, high into the air out of frustration. It flew so high it blocked out the sun and transformed it into a dark splotch. I squinted against the light and began to think.

I knew Iroha was excited to help me come up with a new character, and I felt bad taking that opportunity from her, but I never thought she'd get this upset about it.

There was nobody else on the beach but us. At first, Iroha started teasing me about how we were "all alone," and I couldn't help but remember what had happened in Kageishi Village. It made me feel pretty uncomfortable, but after thirty minutes with none of the other members there to make funny quips and comebacks, I gradually started to realize that it was kind of...lifeless here.

That was when the conversation began to dwindle. It was weirdly awkward, so we picked up the ball we played volleyball with yesterday and started a game of catch.

Each hit of the ball seemed to supply Iroha with a little more adrenaline, and she started speaking faster and faster. This was supposed to be a gentle game of catch with no serves, spikes, receives, and especially no angry players.

"Did you think this Kokuryuuin Kugetsu character was bad, Iroha?"

Iroha paused and looked away. "No," she admitted lamely.

Even if she didn't *like* it, she couldn't lie about her true feelings on the matter.

"There you go. As long as we can't come up with a better character than hers, there's nothing for us to do."

"Hmph."

"If that upsets you, you should take the time to learn about character planning and design yourself. Same goes for me. Maybe we let this chance slip away, but there'll be more characters to create in the future. You're a fast learner, and you've got a good design sense already. I'm sure you'll be able to come up with a character everyone'll love one—"

"That's not the part I'm upset about!"

"Huh?" I froze and stared at her. The beach ball bounced off my head before rolling over the ground towards her feet.

"Why aren't *you* upset, Senpai?"

"Huh? It's obvious, isn't it? My priority is to do what's best for the Alliance, and this is what's best for the Alliance."

"I-I get that, but... It's just the way Canary-san went about it! She basically said that you weren't needed at all! And you're just gonna sit back and agree with her?!"

"You're overthinking it."

“Consider this, then! What if Canary-san said she was gonna take Ozuma and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei out of the Alliance and put them in a team to work on a multimedia project for Makigai Namako-sensei? What would you do then?” Iroha’s usual teasing tone was replaced with a serious one.

What would I do? It should’ve been obvious to her. It was the same thing I’d always have done. My philosophy hadn’t changed one bit.

“I’d let it happen. If it was the best thing for the Alliance.”

Iroha stared at me in disbelief.

“If it gave Ozu and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei an opportunity to use their talents, and if Makigai Namako-sensei was on board, I’d let them go,” I continued. “After that, I could help you decide when you want to reveal yourself as the voice actress, and make sure Canary-san puts your talents to good use. As long as she takes her role as the director of the Alliance seriously, everything’ll be fine. I’m sure she’ll recognize your—huh?!”

My words were interrupted by the beach ball flying at me. I reflexively put out a hand to stop it and frowned at Iroha, who still had the foot she’d kicked it with hovering in the air. It was a nice, clean kick. Plus it meant her ankle was fine now, which was a relief.

“You need to think more highly of yourself, Senpai!” Iroha yelled.

“Whaddya mean?” I sent the ball back to her in a high arch.

“You’re already talking like Canary-san’s better than you, when you might be like, a billion times better than *her*!”

“I’d need a head the size of Jupiter to think I was better than an established pro with a never-ending resume.”

“Well, why can’t your head be that big?”

“You know why. It’s like I always say,” I said quietly.

Iroha opened her mouth, but quickly closed it again.

It was just like I’d told her before. I wasn’t looking for anybody to accept me. The moment somebody starts drowning in praise and being called a “success” by others is the moment they stop growing. They get proud, start thinking they can do anything—and then they tumble down the path of ruin. It was a tale as old as time itself. Just take a quick peek at history, and you’ll see countless companies and people meeting the same fate. I’d be crazy to think I was the one and only exception to the rule.

“I have no idea what Canary-san’s actually thinking. She might not want to take the Alliance from me. I’m just saying that if she does, I don’t have any reason to stop her.”

“So are you saying you’re just gonna sit back, twiddle your thumbs, and wait to see what happens?” Iroha prepared to toss the ball back to me with a pout.

"I didn't say that."

"Huh?"

My words caught her off guard, and she ended up sending it off in a different direction.

"Sitting around doing nothing is the definition of wasting time. You and I are gonna do what we can."

"What we can?"

"Yeah. There's no doubt that Canary-san's talented, and her idea is genuinely amazing. But it doesn't matter how talented she is; this is her first time working on *Koyagi*. She doesn't have a clue about the pitfalls she might walk into."

"Hey, you're right! And that means there's stuff that only you're good at!"

"No, I wouldn't go that far."

"I thought I told you not to be so hard on yourself!"

Hey, it's just who I am, okay?

"I'll prepare for the 'worst,' okay? That all right with you?"

Iroha raced for the ball, which had rolled towards the waves. She picked it up and turned around. "I guess so. But what are we gonna do, exactly?"

"We're gonna prepare some insurance for the possibility that Project Kokuryuuin Kugetsu fails."

Iroha's jaw dropped.

"Granted, she is an editing genius, and an idol to boot. That probably won't happen."

It wouldn't hurt to be overly cautious. Normally, our resources were spread so thin that I didn't have time to worry about "backups" or anything like that. But since I had the time now, and since I was who I was, I was going to take this opportunity to create a safety net.

"Let's do it! We'll come up with some insurance that's even stronger than *all* the different kinds of life insurance you can get put together!"

"Just to point out, insurance in general is one of the least efficient investments you can make, so I wouldn't recommend it."

"Heh heh! Hey, they're the ones 'claiming' the insurance, so it'll be fine! Let's be sure to charge 'em through the nose!" Iroha's eyes sparkled as she tossed the beach ball into the air. It was impressive how quickly her mood turned around.

Thinking about it now, I realized that Iroha was always quick to counter any negative statements I made about myself. She just wouldn't let me talk badly about myself. It was hard to tell sometimes if she was kind or annoying, but of course I knew which it really was.

I didn't want to let Iroha down, so I started thinking about what to do if Kokuryuuin Kugetsu ran into problems. The first step was to

watch the first day of the project carefully. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was supposed to be getting started on the character design work today, so it'd be interesting to see how Canary dealt with the Procrastination Queen herself. That factor alone was going to be huge in how this project played out.

Or so I thought.

"It's done! The coolest, most perfect, and prettiest character design ever! Chirp!"

When Iroha and I returned to the villa after playing on the beach, we found the self-proclaimed seventeen-year-old waving a tablet around in the air.

"It's...done?" I stared.

"No way it's done! That was way too fast! *Especially* for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! If you think we're gonna believe that, you've got another thing coming!"

"I told you I didn't wanna be a lyrebird! Here, I've got proof for you!"

Canary showed us the tablet screen. There was a gothic lolita girl wearing an eyepatch on it.

"It really is done...and to a high standard too!"

"This only happens when Murasaki Shikibu-sensei gets really into it! Grrr!"

The eyepatch was even embroidered with an intricate pattern, and all the smallest details on the character's clothes were filled in carefully. As someone who always cut things close to the deadline, it was rare for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to come up with anything with this much detail at the design stage.

Since the designs weren't made public, I never made a big deal about it. I knew how much she loved her characters, so I was always confident that she'd go back and add all the fiddly details later, once it came to creating the art that would actually be implemented into the game.

Kokuryuuin Kugetsu had gone through some changes since the picture Canary drew. The smallest of details had been woven into every tiny corner to create a masterful tapestry.

"Amazing... This is just the kinda design that *Koyagi* users would go crazy for."

"See? This is why eternal chuunis get on their knees and worship me, chirp!"

"So this is what the renowned charismatic editor is capable of..."

"Keep chirping my praises, go on! I deserve all the praise in the world and more, chirp!"

"But how did you do it?" I asked.

I'd been in charge of the project for ages. I knew firsthand how difficult a task it was to get Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to finish up a character design in less than half a day. It was impossible by any normal means, and I was curious to know what sort of trick Canary'd employed to pull it off.

"I didn't do anything, really. I just locked—er, put her in a work environment so wonderful that her motivation peaked and she couldn't help but do the character design for me, chirp!"

"That almost sounded creepy for a second. You're not being mean to Sumire-chan-sensei, are you?"

"Can I come see this 'work environment'? It'll be good for future reference."

"You got it! Come and see my magical workshop of spirit and time, chirp!"

That name could mean anything. There was only one way to find out for sure, so Iroha and I followed Canary further into the villa. We passed the rooms we were staying in, and there at the end of the corridor, found something very strange indeed.

"An electronic lock?"

Just above the knob on the stylish white door sat a very thick, very unstylish, gray device. Canary held up one tiny hand to it. The device beeped, and there was the sound of a door unlocking.

A fingerprint lock? Whoa...

"Every editor worth their birdseed needs a 'production room' like this. One that doesn't open from the inside."

"I thought you said it was a magic workshop."

"Let's not get tangled up in semantics, chirp. It's time to step inside!" Canary opened the door with her usual energy.

"Wh—"

"Wow."

Iroha and I gawked at the sight in front of us.

"I love drawing... Aha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha!"

White. White everywhere.

The room was big—it had to be nearly fifty-five meters across. This would've been a perfect and comfortable room for housing a guest. If only it were normal. Instead, it was completely white. The floors, the walls, the ceiling... Everything. The only reason I could tell it was a creative space rather than somewhere to house lab animals was because of the desk in the middle of the room, complete with PC, tablet, anatomical models, and other tools of that description.

Apart from that, the room was empty. Sitting at that desk was Sumire, happily sketching away with her pen. She was lining a rough drawing of Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's standing pose on the PC screen. And it looked like she was producing some really nice work.

Normally, Sumire would claim she could take at least three days off after handing in the initial design, and would mess about for a while before starting on the next task. That same Sumire was sitting here and paying her undivided attention to the drawing in front of her.

“S-Sumire-chan-sensei? Are you okay?”

“Aha ha ha! Iroha-chan! What’s the matter? I’m having so much fun!”

“Why d’you sound like a robot then?! Wake up! This isn’t you! This isn’t the real Sumire-chan-sensei!”

“What are you talking about? I love drawing!”

“You’re not even replying to me properly! Sumire-chan-sensei! Come back!” Iroha grabbed Sumire by the shoulders and began to shake her furiously.

Sumire’s head flopped back and forth. Her innocent, childlike gaze locked onto Iroha. Suddenly, it looked like a lightbulb went off in her head. She grabbed her pen and tablet and started drawing again.

“Kokuryuuin Kugetsu-chan sure is cute! I want to draw cute girls. It’s so much fun!” Sumire’s hand was moving so fast it was a blur. Her eyes were spinning like the hypnotized heroine of an NTR H-game as she worked, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

“I get it. This is a prison without fun.”

“Ding ding ding! Chirp!”

I checked my phone. As I thought, I had no signal. *This place must be set up to block out electronic waves.*

“I can’t connect to the internet. I’m guessing the only programs installed on that computer are work-related ones?”

“Yup. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei likes to procrastinate, doesn’t she?”

“You knew?”

“Makigai-sensei told me all about her. Oh, but I also worked it out from the kickoff meeting we did.”

“You worked it out from a single meeting?”

“Hey, I’ve been an editor for a long time, chirp!” Canary winked and flashed us a sideways peace sign.

Everything she did was annoying and cringe, but seeing the very real results of her skills and talent right in front of us sapped my desire to tell her so.

“She’s the type to run away. The type who always goes for the easiest way to do things.”

“It’s like Shikibu’s transformed into a normal person.”

“That’s why it’s so easy to control baby birds like her! You just need to make doing the actual work easier than doing anything else.”

“Makes sense. Though it doesn’t sound like it’d be easy to make her think that.”

“Oh? All it took was making this room. It really didn’t take much at all to get her motivation firing up!”

“Huh. You’re right.”

“Minimize the time, maximize the efficiency. Bash out anything unnecessary and the mind will start to work at max efficiency like this, chirp!” Canary smirked.

“I see...”

That was all I could say to her. It was a genuinely useful tip. I always thought there was scope for getting rid of more of the inefficiencies surrounding *Koyagi*’s illustrations. But I never thought Canary would manage to get the work done more quickly and with more precision than me.

Kiraboshi Kanaria, an editor-slash-idol with a one hundred percent repeat print rate, was a woman to be feared.

The next day: Project Kokuryuuin Kugetsu Day 2.

“Here, Mashiro-senpai! Say ‘aah’!”

“Mmh! That’s good!”

When I came down for breakfast that morning, I was greeted by the strange sight of Mashiro slumping back in her chair. Her mouth was flopped open, while Iroha fed her spoonfuls of yogurt like she was some baby bird.

“How’s she looking, doc?”

“Oh, morning, Senpai.”

“Goodnight...”

“No, Mashiro-senpai! At least finish up your breakfast before you sleep!” Iroha cried, grabbing Mashiro by the slouching shoulders.

I sat down opposite the girls and poured myself some tea from the pot. “Are those corrections on your manuscript really causing you so many problems?”

“Yes...lots of...problems...” Mashiro nodded slowly while her eyelids started drooping shut.

I wasn’t surprised. She’d only just handed in her manuscript the day before yesterday and was already having to correct it. Being a writer must’ve been tough. Again I was reminded of how amazing—and terrifying—Canary was. She’d finished proofreading Makigai Namako-sensei’s script almost straight away after getting it, corrected Mashiro’s, *and* had already placed an order for *Koyagi*’s latest character scenario. Cut out Mashiro from the equation, and it seemed just about manageable, but looking after her on top of Makigai Namako-sensei couldn’t have been easy.

“Don’t work yourself into the ground,” I said. “We’re right by the sea, so if you wanna go out and let your hair down, we’ll hang with

you.”

“What he said. I still wanna hear your one hundred best ocean facts!”

I hadn’t heard about these ocean facts, and now my curiosity was as deep as...the ocean. I really wanted to know if Mashiro *actually* had a hundred of them, or if she was exaggerating.

“Whaddya think, Mashiro? Why don’t you come take a break once you’ve reached a good stopping point?”

“Good stopping point... I reached one yesterday...”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah... Finished the outline...of the scenario.”

“Huh?” A weird jolt ran down my spine.

“Scenario”? I thought she was writing a novel? Wait, that didn’t matter. What did she mean by “outline”?

I thought Mashiro had won an amateur prize and that Canary was helping her make a proper debut in the writing world. She had finished up her story in Kageishi Village, and was here at Canary’s villa to correct it now. The outline was akin to a plan; something that gets finished before you even start writing. So what was she doing making one of those now?

There was only one answer that made any sense.

A single, terrifying answer...

The manuscript was so bad, she was starting again from the outline. In other words...

Her entire story got rejected!

That couldn’t be it, right? If so, my heart shattered for her. I stared at the half-asleep Mashiro, no longer sure what I should say to her.

“Good morning, early birds! We’ve got ourselves the edgiest scenario this century’s ever seen, chirp!” Canary burst into the room while waving a tablet high in the air.

“You mean Kokuryuuin Kugetsu’s scenario? Her backstory?” I asked.

“I sure do! Makigai-sensei’s put his all into this outline, and I think you’ll struggle to find anything better, chirp!”

“Really?! Mind if I read it?” I knew the excitement in my voice had to be obvious, but I couldn’t help it.

“Of course you can read it! You’re the team’s director, featherbrain! You have the right to read this stuff sooner than everyone else! Here you go!”

I took the tablet from her and looked at the screen eagerly. This was less about seeing what was going into *Koyagi*, and more about seeing something new Makigai Namako wrote. I was a big fan of his, and always looked forward to the scenarios he wrote for us. That was

true even though I didn't have a hand in the character creation this time. In fact, I might've been even more excited than usual; this was the first time I was reading a scenario for *Koyagi* that I had zero involvement in.

It was always Makigai Namako-sensei who suggested the ideas for the game's story, of course. However, he always ran everything through me on LIME first, and I usually had a big hand in polishing up those ideas, so the completed scenarios were never totally fresh to me. Right now I was a completely unspoiled reader. This was no different to me picking up the latest volume of *Snow White's Revenge Classroom* with no idea of what was in store for me.

And so I read, taking in each sentence as carefully as I could. First up was Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's introduction. At first, she was an overly eccentric, nonsensical character who messed with and confused the protagonists, but as they tackled the mysteries of the haunted house together, they started to see beneath her surface, empathize with her, and form a bond.

When her surprising backstory was revealed in the second half, the other characters realized they had more in common with her than they thought. Her gimmicks gave players a sense of accomplishment, and the social aspect of the game meant players could work together to unravel the mysteries surrounding her, leading to exciting developments and a tear-jerking ending.

The composition: amazing. As a scenario for a mobile game, it was nothing short of perfect. In fact—

“Hey, Aki. Shut up. You're thinking out loud. It's gross.”

“Oops.”

I was the one embarrassing myself, so why did Mashiro look so mad, and why was her face so red? Maybe she played *Koyagi* herself, and didn't want Makigai's new exciting scenario spoiled for her.

Sorry, Mashiro.

“What do you think, chirp?” Canary smiled expectantly at me in her totally-seventeen-year-old way.

She knew. Hell, she totally knew. That was the face of someone who'd shown you their favorite movie, knew the plot twist at the end was awesome, and was waiting for you to tell them it was awesome. There was only one thing for me to say.

“It's good.”

I didn't need any more words than that. I had so many thoughts, I could've written a whole book on this scenario, but all I could do right now was sum it up in a single four-letter word.

“Knew it! You know I got Makigai-sensei to give a hundred-and-twenty percent of his best, chirp!”

“Hnngh! Senpai! What are you gettin' all misty-eyed over?! This is

just the same quality as the stuff he always writes, isn't it?!"

"No, it's better. You read it, Iroha."

"Hmph! Okay! I'm not a big stinky crybaby like you, so you won't see *me* gettin' all worked up over this!" Iroha insisted stubbornly, taking the tablet from me and scanning the page before promptly bursting into tears. "Waaah! Kokuryuuin Kugetsu-chan! You're too good for this world!"

"See?"

"This is just so *Namako*! And so deep and heart-wrenching!"

"Here. Wipe up those tears." I passed Iroha a handkerchief.

"Oh, thanks." Iroha took it and started wiping at her eyes. "It's weird, though. There is something different about this scenario to the usual stuff Makigai Namako-sensei puts out."

I'd noticed it as well. Maybe it was something that only Canary, as the person who'd first recognized his talents, could bring to the surface.

"Heh heh. You could say that this heroine and Makigai-sensei are birds of a feather."

"Birds of a feather?"

"Yup. On the outside, she looks like a dark, powerful, almost crude girl, but on the inside she's the purest maiden you'll ever find! Makigai-sensei's got that same kinda mismatch between his outer and inner selves. He's just like her, chirp!"

"A maiden?"

Not the first word that came to mind when I thought of Makigai-sensei: a guy. Although to be fair, guy or not, his work had a reputation for being able to accurately portray the more sensitive souls of his female characters. Something inside him, inside his very soul, granted him the ability to understand the essence of femininity and its charms. You could say his heart had boobs.

"An author's work shines brightest when they're writing characters who resemble themselves, chirp, and it's an editor's job to identify just who those characters are!"

"I see. That's good to know."

This was how Kiraboshi Kanaria, aged seventeen(?) did it. This was editing with the pros.

"Hmph..."

"Why are you pouting? You gotta admit; it's good."

"I know, but hmph!" Iroha looked like she was doing everything she could to ignore that fact.

As for Mashiro, she was also pouting for some reason, and poking Canary's ribs. "You're a monster. Why are you doing this? I'm gonna poke holes in your ribs."

"Eek! Ah! Chirp! Squawk! Stop it!"

“What are you doing, Mashiro?”

“Nothing.” Mashiro put an immediate end to her poking and smiled at me sweetly.

Between that and the indignant look on Canary’s face, I had no clue what they were up to.

“I’m just really... I dunno. I’m impressed.”

After breakfast, Mashiro holed herself up in her room to go back to work, and Iroha went off to change into her swimsuit. The kitchen was filled with the sounds of water running off plates and kitchenware clinking together.

“What was that? I’m a total genius? Chirp up! I didn’t hear you properly!”

“You *are* a genius. For real.”

“Aww, ha ha! You’re gonna turn my feathers red, giving it to me straight like that!”

The girl washing up the plates was one of this villa’s cute maids. No, wait, it was the seventeen-year-old(?) Kiraboshi Kanaria. This place’s owner. She had her long, golden hair tied up with a ribbon, and wore an apron that looked like it could belong in any other regular apartment. It was a very grounded look for someone with the insane achievements and dizzying amounts of money she had, but strangely enough, it suited her.

“You do your own chores? Why don’t you hire a housekeeper or something?”

“Because I’m so disgustingly cute, of course! Everyone’s jealous of me. At work, they all bow down before me. I’m rolling in money and success! And how do you make sure someone like that stays likeable?”

“You give her a homely side?”

“Yep! Even if the media swoop down on me for a surprise interview, I’ve got all my ducks in a row, chirp!”

“You’ve gotta put on an act even in your private life? That’s even more impressive.”

She was her own director when it came to keeping up her popularity as an idol, and that was on top of her regular editing work. It might have been cringy to some, like she was trying to ride the coattails of her authors when she was supposed to be more of a background player—and actually, when I looked her up online last night, it turned out she had a lot of haters out there. Canary addressed that criticism in a video on her YTube channel.

“You seeing this right now, haters? Thanks so much for giving me more views, chirp! It’s me, the money-loving idol, Canary! I’m gonna keep on selling my authors’ books to spread happiness throughout the world, chirp!”

That video garnered nearly a thousand dislikes, and more than a hundred thousand likes. If that wasn't a perfect way to explain what made Canary so impressive, I didn't know what was.

Most professionals feared being hated more than anything else. People didn't like PR stunts or pure money-making schemes, so most professionals tried to sugarcoat those things to make them look like they came from a place of charity. Talk about hypocrisy.

They didn't take risks. They didn't step out of line. They never rocked the boat. To describe them in a word: *boring*.

Canary, on the other hand, was totally transparent. Why did she want to be an idol? Because she wanted to sell her authors' books. She wanted the money to promote them, launch mixed media projects, and get a good chunk of remuneration on top of that. She was completely open about that last point. The only lie she told was about her age—but I wouldn't even call that a lie. It was just part of the character she'd created.

Her hopes, ambitions, and everything personal to her were on full display. Canary stuck fast to her character, no matter how tough the going got, and at the root of that character was a burning love and indescribable devotion towards her authors.

It was a character, right? This couldn't seriously be her actual personality... But then, seeing as she acted this way even in private, maybe it had become who she really was.

"I've worked hard to create this cute girl image, right? I can do what I want with it. Oh, but don't you dare call it manipulation, chirp!"

"I get it. You gotta be conscious of your own branding. That's how you're able to come up with a character as charming as Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, isn't it?"

"Oooh? Impressed by my talents, are we?"

"Yeah. I almost *want* you to take the Alliance from me." I made my declaration firmly.

Canary stopped scrubbing the plate in her hand and stared at me with rounded eyes. Her lips curled into a smile.

"Have you ever considered becoming a magnificent idol, chirp?"

"No thanks." There was no hesitation in *that* declaration either.

"Shame! You could make it big as my protégé, you know. It'd be a wing-wing situation."

"The reason your stuff sells as well as it does is because you've perfected every last basic detail down to a fine art." Years and years of practice and devotion led her to the enormous success she enjoyed now. Trying to copy her superficially would only make me cringe beyond belief. "I'm not at that stage yet, and I don't even know if I'd be capable of reaching it."

“Huh. A little splash of self-awareness. I like that.” Her tone changed for that last sentence. It sounded like her real voice; not like the voice she put on for her character. Canary paused to think, then prodded the tip of my nose with her bubble-covered finger. “Okay, let this little birdie tell you something. Something you could improve on.”

“Are you sure?” I tried to ignore the ticklish sensation on my nose. A professional’s advice was invaluable.

“I’ve been keeping my eye on *Koyagi* and how it’s doing for a while now, chirp.”

“Makes sense, since you’re competing with me for Makigai-sensei’s time.”

“That’s not why. I like the game itself.”

“Whoa. Thank you so much.”

“I’ve been thinking about stuff like getting Makigai-sensei to novelize it, and other future investments like that, chirp. But also...” Canary twirled back towards the sink to pick up another plate. The top was shiny and covered in bubbles, but when she turned it over, it still had dark grease stains on it. “There’s a dark side to your directing that you’re ignoring.”

“A dark side?”

“Yeah. Your ability to treat your team well and move the project forward while constantly keeping things fun for them is incredible. But there’s only so far you can bring a project with that kind of attitude, chirp. Trauma, hatred, resentment... These emotions—these curses—lie deep within the heart. Can you, as a producer, dig into your team’s hearts to pull those things out? If not, you’re going to struggle whenever a hurdle comes up. You’re going to struggle to grow.”

“I know that negative emotions have the potential to create masterpieces.”

“And yet, for the most part, you pretend those emotions don’t exist.”

My mouth dropped open. Just how keen were her powers of observation?

My priority tended to be striking a balance when it came to the Alliance. I knew I was dealing with a team that had psychological vulnerabilities, and I’d always made every decision with the utmost care and efficiency, scared of putting a foot wrong and causing irreversible damage to them. Was all that just turning a blind eye to these “curses,” as Canary put it?

“Let me give you an example. Are you in love?”

“Huh? Um... W-Wait, what has that got to do with anything?”

“An ambiguous answer. In other words, yes.”

“Hold on a second! It’s not ‘yes’! It’s more of a, ‘I’m not sure, but...” I paused. “Oops.”

I’d basically just outright admitted to her that I thought I might be in love but I was having trouble working it out. Sure enough, Canary was grinning. Her eyes sparkled like a housewife’s who’d just caught wind of some spicy gossip.

“Who is it?! Mashiro-chan? Or Iroha-chan?”

“What, I only get two options?”

“Well, it’s not gonna be Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, is it? The age gap makes it a crime, and though I guess she’s easy to sympathize with, she’s not exactly girlfriend material.”

Ouch. I didn’t know if I agreed; dating Murasaki Shikibu-sensei might be fun, if nothing else. Not that I would date her myself, but I’d be happy to recommend her to someone else. Especially someone who’d be willing to sit at home and whip her so that she’d get her illustrations in on time.

“Yeah. I guess looking at my social circle, they’re the only two candidates.”

“Yup, yup! Chirp! They’re both cute too!”

“Cute? Yeah, I guess. Objectively speaking,” I replied vaguely.

“Trying not to think too hard about it, huh?”

“Uh. Sure. I guess.”

“I knew it! That’s so you, chirp!” Canary thrust her finger out in front of me and winked.

She was annoying as all hell—but she quickly lowered her finger, dropped the cheeky smile from her face, and straightened up, looking back at the dirty side of the plate. When she spoke again, her voice was subdued.

“You’re kind and tolerant. That’s why people feel so comfortable depending on you.” Canary glanced at me. She smiled. That smile held a mix of emotions: pity, loneliness, and resignation. “But that’s also why they can’t show their darker sides in front of you.”

“You mean because I’m weak or something? Or untrustworthy?”

“No, it’s the opposite. It’s because you’re perfect.”

Huh? I wasn’t perfect.

I was the only one in the Alliance who wasn’t a genius brimming with talent. *They* were the perfect ones. Some of them struggled with certain skills, like communication, but when it came to their field of work, perfect was a good word for it.

Meanwhile, here I was with nothing. That was why I always made up for my shortcomings with hard work and efficiency.

In short, I had no idea what this self-proclaimed seventeen-year-old was trying to say.

“You’re like some kind of superhuman hero in the way you ‘direct’

yourself. You don't cause trouble, you don't let your emotions get in the way, and you keep just the right distance, all while taking the most perfect path available to you."

"Who are you talking about? 'Cause it's not me—"

"What you think about yourself, and what others think about you are two totally separate things, chirp. At the very least—well, okay, so technically she's not in the Alliance—but there's something I've learned by keeping my eagle eye on Iroha-chan."

"What's that? That she's super annoying?"

"She didn't show you her swimsuit, right? Even though you're out here on the beach."

"Huh?"

Canary's words were enough to launch a flurry of question marks flying through my mind. Iroha's swimsuit? What did that have to do with anything? The whole thing was just a prank. She just thought it'd be funny to make me think I was gonna see her in a bikini and then bamboozle me by coming out wearing a jacket. That was all.

"You look confused."

"Uh, of course I'm confused. What's Iroha's bikini got to do with me being perfect?"

"What a naive little fledgling you are! You really don't understand, do you?" Canary wagged an exasperated finger in front of my face and tsked. "When you're a girl who lacks confidence in her body, swimsuits are your biggest enemy."

"Lacks confidence?"

She couldn't be talking about the same Kohinata Iroha I knew; that girl was renowned at school for her stunning looks. Whenever she picked on me, she'd often use her feminine assets to do it. That wasn't something that somebody who "lacked confidence" in their looks or body would do.

"You've got it backwards," I insisted. "Iroha's totally brimming with confidence."

"Aaand that's why you need to get laid. Chirp. It's just like the ancient texts say: the prettier the girl, the less willing she is to show off her chest, chirp."

"The ancient texts don't say that. And if they did, they wouldn't add 'chirp.'"

"Cultural musings aside, Aki-kun, I want you to put a hand to your chest and think about breasts. Have you seen Iroha-chan's boobs?"

"Huh?! O-Of course I haven't! Why would I have?!" My voice cracked.

Why the hell had she asked me *that*? At our age, a girl's boobs weren't something you could just have access to—unless you were a

protagonist in an overly fanservicey harem shonen manga.

“And why do you think she won’t show them to you?”

“Because she’s normal. In that respect at least.”

“So why do you think not showing you her boobs is the normal thing to do?”

“Well, I mean, it’s embarrassing...”

“That’s right. Iroha-chan would find it embarrassing. That’s what it means to lack confidence, chirp. It takes a rare kind of girl to not be ashamed of flaunting her nakedness. You’ve got the goddess Freyja, the Venus de Milo, and me. That’s probably about it.”

“Ranking yourself up there with the gods, huh? You’re right, you don’t lack confidence.” I smiled at her wryly.

“I don’t really care where I stand in the social pecking order, actually,” Canary said airily, placing the now-clean plate in the dish rack. “What I’m saying is, it’s a mentality thing.”

“Mentality?”

“I stand shoulder to shoulder with the gods, right? From where we are, all the humans way down below are just like measly insects. And who cares if some bug sees them naked?”

Ouch.

“So what you’re saying is you could strip naked in front of a lowly being like me and it wouldn’t bother you at all?”

“I can do it right now if you want.”

“Wait, no! At least wait for me to reply!” I said quickly, before Canary could pull up her skirt more than she already had. I was kidding; I never thought she’d actually do it.

“Don’t worry. Idols aren’t supposed to be seen naked, so it wasn’t like I was gonna strip for real. But I wouldn’t find it embarrassing or anything, chirp.”

“Seriously? Uh... Actually, I believe you!” I didn’t want to risk a repeat of the last couple of seconds.

Canary grinned smugly. “See, this is exactly what embarrassment is all about. It’s not scary at all to do something ‘embarrassing’ in front of somebody with either a lower status than yourself, or someone who’s gonna get more embarrassed than you. When you’re dealing with someone above you, however, or someone with no chinks in their armor, suddenly things get a lot more terrifying, chirp.”

It sounded like nonsense, but I could just about see the thread of logic passing through it. I wasn’t sure, though. It might’ve just been Canary’s smooth tongue that was convincing rather than there being any truth to her words.

“You work so hard to hide your dirty desires and not to tread on people’s toes. That self-control you display directly affects the rest of the group—and that’s your biggest weakness as its director.”

“My weakness...”

“Eh, I don’t expect you to get it right away,” Canary said with a twirl. When she turned, her head was tilted as she looked at me and winked. You know, the cool head slant thing from anime. “You’ve got this whole week to hang with Iroha-chan all by yourself. You should take the time to stretch your wings and relax a little.”



It looked to me like Canary had both finished the dishes *and* was done with everything she wanted to say. With those words, she turned and made her way out of the room with elegant steps.

“I try to hide my desires, huh?”

As soon as Canary was gone, I leaned back in my chair to chew over her words.

Desire was one of the central pillars of the entertainment industry. Even as an average guy, I could see why Canary, as a professional editor, was keen to analyze things to their core. I was similar when it came to Koyagi; I was always careful to make sure the dark emotions Makigai Namako-sensei crafted into his scenarios were properly represented in the game itself. Uncertainty, fear, jealousy, rage, and love.

Whether we were tapping into our players’ desire for security, social approval, materialism, or even their sexual appetites, it was all those types of desire that let us reach our players’ hearts. But it was like Canary said. Those were our *players’* desires. My own never came into the picture.

Love. It was a notion as old as time itself, and the most extreme example of human desire. You could even say it was the root of all greed.

“I get it...”

Maybe my failure to understand them properly was a cause of inefficiency. When I said “them,” I was talking about the strange, unsettled feelings I’d been having towards Iroha ever since that dumb ceremony in Kageishi Village.

Just looking at her face made my heart quicken. Just being teased by her made my face burn. Just hearing her voice... Just smelling her shampoo... Just... Just... Just...

I thought about the smallest of her features, one after the other, and objectively scrutinized my reactions to them. It was then I realized.

Kohinata Iroha. My friend’s little sister who had it in for me.

If I listened to my desires, what would they say? How would I feel about her? How did I *want* to feel about her? What if I couldn’t surpass Canary until I worked this all out? What if the answer meant Ozu, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and Makigai Namako-sensei would no longer want to be a part of the Alliance? What if it meant that my decision to pour everything I had into this project at the expense of romance and youth was wrong?

If I let my inferior self get distracted by those things, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the rest of the group and their superior abilities. I’d have to grow. Improve myself. But if that meant turning a blind

eye to my desires and emotions, then I wouldn't be able to bring out the full extent of my team's talent.

I was caught between a solid rock and a very, very hard place.

And what if "love" was necessary to achieve my goals? What would that mean for Mashiro, who plucked up the incredible courage needed to face her emotions and confess to me? If I had paused to reevaluate my ideals like this earlier, would my answer to her have been different? Maybe not, since Mashiro had nothing to do with the Alliance—but I just didn't know for sure.

What was the answer? What was I supposed to be focusing on? Who the hell set the difficulty level of my life so high? I was just an average guy with average abilities. At least set it down to normal, please. Preferably easy.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"Typical Aki. The answer's right there in front of you, and you're still frettin' over it."

"..."

"Here's a hint. I'd recommend the path of love and youth."

"That's 'cause you're nice."

"What, and that means you'd feel bad taking my well-meaning advice because I'm 'too nice'?"

"..."

"Get it now, Aki? Welp. I guess that's Aki for you."

Chapter 9: My Friend's Little Sister's Bikini Has It In for Me!

One day passed, and then another.

With the concept art done for the new character, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei went on to work on the poses and card art, sketching them, lining them, and finally coloring them. The scenario's main text, too, was gradually reaching completion. Needless to say, the quality for both aspects was flawless.

It was likely that Canary's *Koyagi* character was the best one to date. I knew, because I'd spent more time working on *Koyagi* than anybody else. I already knew the players would be calling Kokuryuuin Kugetsu a masterpiece, and she wasn't even out yet.

And then there was Ozu's A.I. system. It analyzed our users' current progress, and data collected from their previous sessions, such as their likelihood to obtain new characters, how much of the story they read and how many scenarios they'd read to completion, how many had stopped playing, etc. That data was used to calculate the perfect conditions to make Kokuryuuin Kugetsu obtainable to the players who wanted her, but not without them putting in the effort. Ozu then scripted the event, which Canary would check over and fine-tune.

As I observed the entire process, I recognized that it was nothing short of professional work. It made me realize again just how talented and amazing the Alliance members were. That was why my head was full of questions I had to ask myself.

Am I really qualified to direct them?

Couldn't a professional like Canary do more to bring out their talents?

Wouldn't the Alliance members be more successful working on projects other than Koyagi?

What is it about me that means I should be the one to lead them? Who am I? What can I offer them?

Endless, endless questions. If I couldn't answer them, I didn't deserve to be here. And if the Alliance could get better results without me, then I knew that would be for the best.

"Senpai! Come look at this! It's such a weird shape!"

"Cool."

"And this crab is huge! And black! I thought crabs were s'posed to be red!"

“Cool.”

“Aha ha ha! This starfish is makin’ me laugh! It’s cute but kinda gross, like Sumire-chan-sensei getting blind drunk and collapsing on the couch!”

“Cool.”

“Hey! Are you even listening to me?!”

“Cool.”

“...”

“Cool.”

“Oh, I get it! You’re so excited to see me in my ultra cute bikini that you’re spacing out! You’re such a perv, Senpai!”

“Cool.”

“...”

“Cool.”

“...”

“Coo—”

“Cut it out already!”

Something hit me hard in the face, and I only registered Iroha’s shout afterwards. “Gah! What?! What is it?!”

I pulled the object off my face, only to see it was an interestingly shaped starfish.

What the hell, Iroha? That’s so gross.

“Why are you spacing out? You haven’t forgotten what we’re supposed to be doing, have you?”

“Uh... What are we doing again?”

“Underwater fishing!”

“Wait. What?”

We were standing on the shore. I looked down at my right hand to find I was holding on to a harpoon. There was a bucket by my feet full of shellfish, crabs, and other such creatures. The sound of them clawing at the plastic side of the bucket mixed into the noise of the lapping waves.

Iroha glared at me, indignant. “You were the one who said we should do what we can!”

“And that means underwater fishing, why?”

“Well, like three days ago you said, ‘Let’s reward everyone with some fresh fruits of the sea!’ or something.”

“I did? Well, I mean, this stuff sure is fresh, but is it edible?”

“I wouldn’t count on it, to be honest.”

The creatures crawling around in the bucket looked very different from the offerings on the fish counters in the supermarket. Eating them wasn’t worth the risk of finding out they were poisonous. I suggested to Iroha she might want to set the creatures free, so she tipped the bucket over, allowing the creatures to start waddling off

home.

Thinking back now, neither of us were really taking the fishing stuff seriously, and it wasn't what we were supposed to be doing either.

Iroha and I couldn't just enjoy the summer by ourselves while everyone else was busy slaving away over their desks to get the new character ready by the one-week deadline. I know that wasn't technically why *Mashiro* was so busy this week, but that didn't change the fact she was in the same boat as everyone else.

Iroha and I wanted to come up with a plan of our own, and we'd decided to get some exercise to get the creative juices flowing. We thought it'd be neat to catch some seafood to reward everyone for their work, which was why we started the whole underwater fishing thing.

But if Iroha was to be believed, I'd started spacing out.

One day passed, and then another. Every time I saw the amazing progress everyone had made, I started feeling more and more down.

I knew it was pathetic, but I was jealous to see *Koyagi* being worked on without me. It wasn't like the game belonged solely to me. It was a product of everybody's hard work, and that was all the more reason I didn't have the right to complain about it being "taken" from me.

I sighed.

"C'mon, stop frowning like that! Take this!" Iroha kicked up a spray of water with her bare foot.

"Bleurgh! Quit it, dumbass."

After a few days at the villa, Iroha's foot was now completely healed up. I squirmed under the water her now-healthy foot had sprayed me with, and screwed up my face as saltwater spread over my tongue.

Iroha laughed at my reaction. "Gotcha!"

"Bitch..."

"Hey, it's your fault. You get the super-special chance to hang out alone with the stunningly beautiful Iroha, and you just stand there with fuzz in your brain!"

"Sorry for ignoring you. I just can't stop thinking."

"About the new character?"

"Yeah..."

"Hmm..." Iroha glanced around and lowered her voice. "Come here a sec."

"Huh?"

This was a private beach, so there was no one around to spy or eavesdrop, but she still grabbed my arm and began to pull me along like that was exactly what she was frightened of. I followed after her,

wondering what had gotten into her.

Iroha led me to a rocky area further down the shore. This was a blind spot as far as the villa was concerned, so there was no risk of us being seen.

“I-Iroha? What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about that, just sit there. Go on.”

“Right...”

Something about her tone made me obey and go to sit down on a rock. I nearly stumbled on the uneven ground, and had to fight to keep my balance. It was harder than I expected and it was starting to mess with my balance.

Suddenly, Iroha’s face was right there next to mine.

“Wh-What?!” My voice was wobbling and I knew it.

It wasn’t that long ago that having Iroha so close that I could feel her breath on my cheek was an everyday occurrence, and something that I thought nothing of. Now, things were different. I couldn’t help but be aware of our proximity this time. I felt stuck, like one of those butterfly samples they trap in cases and hang on the wall. Iroha’s voice was laced with the threatening aura of an immortal, all-powerful beautiful being who was feared by all.

“My brother. Expose the darkness inside you and allow it to melt into my jet-black flames.”

“Come again?”

“Translation: if something’s bothering you, you can tell me and I’ll help you out.”

“A Japanese to Japanese translation? That’s a first... Hey, wait.”

I was suddenly overcome with a sense of *déjà vu*, like I’d seen a character who spoke in overly dramatic riddles like that recently.

“Kokuryuuin Kugetsu. You told me to practice her voice, right?”

“Oh, right. That’s who you were doing.”

“Yep. Though I don’t have the script yet, so I’m basically going off what you and I *think* she’s like right now.”

That was one of the things we could do while everyone else was busy working hard: get a good feel for the character, so we would be ready to record her lines as soon as the scenario was done. It would mean calling Otoi-san back from her songwriting getaway up north, but I was sure she’d help us out, even if she did grumble a bit. There was a reason I had recently tracked down a new store where I could get my hands on a shine muscat cake.

“Okay, so why d’you bring out your Kokuryuuin Kugetsu voice just now then? Anyway, I don’t have anything to tell you, ’cause nothing’s bothering me.”

“Liar!”

“Ow...? Nah, actually, that didn’t hurt.”

For a second I thought Iroha had just slapped me, but it turned out to be another starfish. Its moistness on my cheek made it quite a bit more annoying.

“You are but a fledgling unaccustomed to the darkness. What say you? Can you offer me your repentance? (That means, please don’t suffer by yourself! You can tell me anything!)”

“How long are you planning to keep that up?”

“Till you start being honest!”

Was this a new weapon in her teasing toolkit? At least it was helpful for cementing our ideas about new characters. That’d reflect in the quality of their scenarios too.

“Like I said, I’ve got nothing to tell you. Nothing new, anyway.”

I couldn’t stop working hard, or I wouldn’t be able to face the talented members of the Alliance again. My problem was defining what “working hard” was. Was I doing the right thing? Was there anything more I could be doing? What if I wasn’t doing enough?

“It’s the same stuff I’ve always worried about.”

Only this time, I was worrying about it a little more than I used to. Iroha listened attentively before allowing her face to crack into a vampiric smile.

“Yours is a bouquet of flourishing flowers. Was it your intention to touch one of those beautiful flowers, only to be pricked by a poisonous thorn? (You’re stressed because you’re surrounded by geniuses, right?)”

“Stressed? I guess. It’s like, I thought I had everything figured out, but now I’m realizing maybe I didn’t.”

“You need not be envious of the flowers, for you are the sacred tree which even the flowers themselves envy. (You’re special in your own way, Senpai!)”

“How? I’m totally replaceable. If the Alliance doesn’t need me, then I’m fine dipping out, and I will, if it’s the most efficient choice.”

Actually, I would *have* to leave in that case. Sometimes the truth could be ugly and fickle. Take someone who acts according to their lofty ideals. Eventually their sense of justice can become so overpowering that they end up committing great acts of evil in order to stick to those values and don’t even bat an eyelid. It’s like the manager who’s sick of his CEO’s dictatorial and medieval business practices, and then goes off to make his own company, only to start treating his employees in the same way. It’s like somebody who tries to make a space for his talented friends in society, only to try and snatch it away for himself when he realizes he can benefit from it.

That was why I was always so self-critical. If I convinced myself I was doing everything for them out of kindness so they’d owe me, I’d end up stumbling. If I clung too hard to my position in the Alliance,

I'd lose my way. Society already had enough people and groups plagued with inefficiencies like that. That was what I thought.

"Or not..." I murmured.

Was this part of Canary's plan too? A sneaky trick to trap me in the abyss of inaction? I started muttering. All these weaknesses, these flecks of dirt inside me that I never wanted to bring to the surface, and yet now they were spilling from my mouth. At least I could say I tried to smile while I spoke.

"It's tough. Seeing the full extent of what they can do." I scratched my cheek.

"Senpai..."

"Oh, sorry. I guess complaining about it won't do anything, huh?"

I thought back to one year ago. Things had changed a lot since then. Ozu's communication skills had come a long way, and now he was able to conduct himself properly. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was no longer bound by her family traditions. *Koyagi* itself was gaining more and more recognition, increasing the market value of its creators. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that society was already starting to recognize their talents. There was just one caveat.

"Seeing Canary-san working with them like that makes me think that maybe they don't need me anymore." I was finally voicing it aloud. The words came out more easily than I expected. "I get it; Canary-san's a talented editor, and not many people can do what she does. Even if it's not someone as impressive as her, the Alliance needs a decent producer. Those come at a dime a dozen and I realize that there's no reason it has to be me."

Once I started speaking, I couldn't stop. The words came tumbling out like a fast-flowing river, and the filth from the top of that stream was carried down to pile up at the bottom.

"And I keep thinking like...because I've brought the Alliance this far, there are bound to be other producers who are going to notice the team and its members." I could taste that dirty water; I was nearly choking on it. I still couldn't stop speaking. "I know my way of thinking is disgusting. I have this inefficient desire to hold on to them, even though that's only gonna hold them back. Jealousy. That's all it is. Heh."

That was it. Every last speck of dirt was out in the open. I felt so much better the moment it was, and then got back around to hating myself again. All I'd done was complain. Complaining wasn't productive, and it sure as hell wasn't going to change anything.

"Senpai..."

Even Iroha looked like she didn't know how to react.

"Don't worry about it. Just pretend I didn't say anything," I said quickly.

But Iroha shook her head, shutting down my plea ruthlessly. She grabbed at the seam of her rash guard just above the curve of her chest with one hand.

“I thank you, my brother, for revealing to me what lies inside your cocoon of woe. (Thanks for telling me this stuff!)” Iroha smiled at me gently. “As one who lives in the dark, the blinding light of the sun sets my passion aflame! (I think you’re dazzling, Senpai!)”

“In that case, you need to get your eyes tested. I’m weak. Weak and gross.”

Iroha was exaggerating. All I came back with was the truth.

She let out a soft sigh. She must’ve realized that it didn’t matter what she said; nothing could change how I felt right now. Nothing could change how much I hated myself.

“Okay. I’ve got an idea.” Iroha grabbed the zipper on her rash guard. “Behold!”

She ripped it away from her body, like she was casting off the chains of an invisible curse.

“H...u...h?”

I didn’t know how to react. I just blinked at her, my mouth hanging open.

For a proud, immortal beauty like Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, showing off her naked body to a lowly insect like me was no big deal. Was that what this was?

Dazzlingly bright. That was the first phrase that came to mind. Original, right?

The rock blocked out some of the sun’s light, casting thin shadows over Iroha’s pale skin, which was covered by nothing but her bikini. I’d already seen the bikini when she sent me that photo over LIME. Its bright sunshine shade suited Iroha, and I could swear I caught a citrusy scent coming off it.



Her legs were long with just the right amount of fat on them, and with her flat stomach shifting down into shapely hips, she boasted a body that would give any magazine model a run for her money.

Iroha's chest was...just as I expected, if I may be so bold. I had a good idea from the number of times I'd felt them against my arms and back, and it's not like I spent every day fantasizing about them, but y'know, I am a teenage boy, so I would say I thought about them as much as any other teenage boy would. But anyway, they were pretty big.

That last paragraph wasn't that important by the way, so it's fine just to skim it, forget about it, and move on (please). The long and short of it is that there was some teenage girl with big boobs in a bikini in front of me. That's all you really need to know.

"Senpai? Mind sayin' something? You're making things awkward."

"Huh? Oh, right. Sorry. Uh. What do you want me to say?"

In the first place, I didn't know what had compelled her to suddenly show off her bikini-clad body to me. She wore the rash guard like a shawl, and it fluttered almost divinely in the sea breeze as Iroha stood there averting her gaze, her cheeks pinkened. Being the virgin I was, seeing her like that sent my heart racing. I wonder if she knew?

"Everyone at school says I'm pretty and stuff, y'know."

"I know."

I suddenly realized she wasn't doing the whole Kokuryuuin Kugetsu thing anymore. The girl in front of me was Kohinata Iroha, plain and simple.

"The boys always stare at me. They say I'm the cutest girl in the universe."

"Wait, they know the cuteness rating of every single girl in the universe?"

"Oh, but we're split into boys and girls for swimming class, so they've never seen me in my school swimsuit."

"Right. Mind telling me where this is going?"

"Ozuma hasn't seen me wearing it either."

"Okay, but what's your point?!"

"Oh my God. I don't believe this. You still don't get what I'm saying?!"

"Of course I don't! Just tell me instead of waiting for me to guess!"

"What I'm saying is that you're the only one to see this! To see me in my bikini!" Iroha shouted, her eyes squeezed shut. Her face was red and her lips were trembling, but she still flung her arms out wide.

"You're not average anymore now, are you?!"

“What?”

“You’ve seen something that no other boy at school has! Seeing me like this is something they can only dream of! So no matter how much you put yourself down now, at least now you know you’ll always be number one in the ‘people who have seen Iroha-chan in a bikini’ worldwide ranking!”

It was the dumbest argument I’d ever heard, but I could feel the love in her heartfelt attempt to cheer me up. When I said love, I met something more basic than silly romantic love. It was the simple fact that she cared about me, something she’d just proved to me beyond all doubt.

I was pathetic, though. Forcing my kouhai to go to such lengths.

“Thanks,” I said simply, looking away from her and scratching my cheek awkwardly. Sure, I was embarrassed, but I wasn’t shameless enough not to thank her. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up, even when I was just grumbling and complaining like a pathetic loser.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been waiting for you to tell me all that stuff for *ages*!”

“Was I that obvious?”

“No. It’s just, knowing how you always are, and how you always try and do stuff without expecting anything in return, I thought you’d crack eventually. Except then you didn’t, and you didn’t even say anything, so I thought either you were some kinda emotionless superhuman, or you were just bottlin’ it all up. How come you never told anyone this stuff before?”

“It’d be inefficient to bother everyone in the team with it.”

A creator’s mental state had a huge influence on their product. It would have been easy for me to voice my complaints out loud, but I was worried it’d have a negative impact on the Alliance’s productivity.

“Oh, right. Y’know, I’ve wanted to say this for a while, and I guess this is as good a time as any.”

“Uh, sure. Go ahead.”

Was it just me, or did she suddenly look exasperated?

“W-Wait! What are you doing?!”

Iroha put one foot up on a rock and leaned in close to me. It was bad enough having her here in that revealing swimsuit, but when she brought her face close to me like this, it felt like I was gonna explode. I squirmed, but Iroha took no notice and prodded my chest with a slender accusing finger.

“The 05th Floor Alliance.”

“Right?”

“When you say ‘efficiency,’ what you mean is, the shortest way to make the Alliance members happy, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Okay. Guess that makes you inefficient.”

“I see. How can I improve?”

“You can improve by not assuming there’s something you need to improve.”

“That sounds to me like a logical fallacy.”

“I’m telling you to value yourself more! I mean—” Her finger still stuck against my chest, Iroha’s gaze hardened, and she looked me right in the eye as she spoke. “—you’re an Alliance member too, Senpai.”

I stared at her.

“If you can’t even make yourself happy, that makes you a failure.”

It was only the very tip of her finger that touched me, but the heat emanating from it seemed to spread and burn over my entire body.

“You say that.” I sighed. “But you know it’s just how I am.”

“Yeah. I know.” A sinister grin rose to Iroha’s lips. “By the way, welcome to the top spot of the ‘people who’ve had their bare skin touched by Iroha-chan’ worldwide ranking. How’s it feel to be number one?”

“Not great, because the title’s too open to misinterpretation. Plus, it’s not like I had any competition, right?”

“Nope! By the way, you’re also top in ‘people whose room Iroha-chan has sneaked into,’ and ‘people who’ve had Iroha-chan’s body pressed up against them,’ so you’re basically the most impressive guy in the entire world.”

“Anyone can be the most impressive person in the world if they get to decide their own dumb tiering system like that.”

“Heh heh! Not a fan of compliments, huh? Welp, it’s my job to do all the stuff you don’t like, so I’m just gonna keep going on and on about how you’re the best guy in the world!” Iroha grinned her usual annoying grin and gave me a hearty salute.

She really was a handful. But there was something else. Maybe it was because I tried not to think too hard about it before, or because what happened with the Ceremony of Knots had changed my perspective. But for some illogical, irrational reason—that had about as much legitimacy to it as Iroha’s annoying, crazy, and made-up rankings—being called the “best guy in the world” while she smiled at me like that (even if she was doing it to annoy me)...

...It made my chest feel tight. *Really* tight.

What were these emotions I’d been feeling towards Iroha recently? Honestly, I still wasn’t sure if they could be called romantic, but there was one thing I could say with certainty.

Right now, I thought Iroha was cute.

Until now, I always thought she was cute from the perspective of your average member of society, and I recognized that most boys out

there would think her “cute” as long as she didn’t open her mouth or show them what she was really like. That’s not the definition I’m talking about now.

I thought that Iroha was cute, *while she was being annoying*.

I always thought it would make sense for all humans, no matter their gender, to act kindly to the object of their affections in the pursuit of love.

In fact, I was sure that tsunderes and girls who acted mean to their crushes couldn’t exist outside the world of anime and light novels. 3D girls should be more straightforward, smile at their crushes, and make their feelings clear from the get-go.

That was the line of logic I had always followed, but right now it was being ripped up by its roots.

Maybe girls that were both annoying *and* cute could exist. Maybe being annoying to the object of your affections could make them sweet on you. Maybe that *was* a valid and efficient tactic in the pursuit of love.

I didn’t know how Iroha felt towards me. Even if her feelings were positive, they didn’t have to be romantic. It could just be because she was a genuinely nice person. But as for me, I’d finally realized it: she was both annoying *and* cute.

That didn’t mean I could figure out whether the pounding of my heart in that moment had anything to do with romance. Maybe if they were, I wouldn’t be feeling this confused. But it was like when Mashiro pursued me—that got my heart racing, simply because I was in the presence of a cute girl. And that was definitely what was happening now. I don’t mean any of this in a purely sexual sense either.

My friend’s little sister was annoying. Annoying when she laughed, annoying when she talked. Annoying was her natural state. But she was cute.

The realization suddenly struck me hard—hard enough to make me grin like an idiot. I quickly covered my mouth and averted my gaze before I could. It didn’t escape Iroha’s notice.

“Ah! Senpai, are you blushing?!”

“N-No way!”

“Liar, liar, cheeks on fire! They’re bright red! Heh! I know what’s going on! You’re just like any other guy, Senpai! Of course you’re totally digging me in a bikini!”

“Shut it! Don’t get ahead of—yourself!”

“Ha ha! ‘Yourself!’ I didn’t know you were so sensitive, Senpai!” Iroha drew rings over my skin with her fingertip.

I squirmed as tingles shot up my spine. “Qu-Quit it... I’m— Not there!”

“Poke, poke, poke, poke, poke, poke, poke, poke, poke!”

“Stop!”

“Aha ha ha! Bullying you sure is a blast! I don’t think I *can* stop!”

Kohinata Iroha. A cruel girl who laughed in the face of my agony. But watching her do whatever she wanted—that was, having fun and wearing her desires on her sleeve—reminded me of what Canary said.

That I should be less hesitant about being honest about my own desires, and not just devote everything I had to the Alliance and hold myself back when I was also a member. There might be a path—a path to manage my team fruitfully and efficiently—where I also get to be true to myself.

I got to spend these fun days with my super cute and super annoying kouhai. Maybe it was okay to think that I wanted them to last, just a little longer.

“Thanks, Iroha. I get it now.”

“Heh heh! Looks like we got the old Senpai back!”

“Huh? I’m not sure I’m the same old Senpai I used to be, actually.”

“You sure look like him. The guy who’s just figured out the most efficient way to do something.”

“Oh. You might be right there.”

I guess you could say I’d come back to my original goal: the most efficient way to bring the Alliance as much happiness as possible. The only difference now was that I was prepared to face my own feelings.

Compared to the bundle of confusion I’d been over the past few days, this was probably closer to the “real me.” I felt like I knew how to deal with the Alliance again, just like I used to. I had to be grateful to Iroha, who had lifted me out of my funk, and Canary, who had presented me with those challenging questions. But that could wait for now.

I turned to look at Iroha, cracked my knuckles, and grinned. “I’m guessing that all that tickling you did means you’re ready for me to give you twice as much in return?”

“No thanks. Try it, though. I’ll cry out that I’m being sexually harassed as loud as I can.”

“That’s playing dirty.”

“Look, if you *really* wanna touch me that bad, I can think about it. All you gotta do is get on your knees and start bawling. ‘Please, Iroha-chan! Please let me tickle you!’”

“Okay.”

“What?”

“Degrading myself for five seconds to get revenge for your merciless attack is a small price to pay.”

“W-Wait. You’re kidding, right, Senpai?”

“I’m not the kinda guy to just take the abuse. I’m looking forward

to hearing you cry, though.”

“W-W-Wait! Stop! Stay back! Eeek!”

Iroha’s howls of pained laughter pealed out under the summer sky. It turned out this annoying girl who’d tickled me was super sensitive herself. She got back to the sand and fell down while trying to get away from me, her body twitching. If she was that weak, I wondered why she’d picked this fight in the first place.

Having overcome my mental block and made a ton of progress to boot, Iroha and I returned to the villa after having had our fill of fun on the beach.

That was when it happened.

“A-Aki-kun... Iroha-chan...”

Just as we were stepping inside, Canary appeared. Her cheeks were hollow, and she was staggering towards us like a newborn fawn. She clung to the towel that hung around my shoulders to keep herself stable.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m sorry! Please help! I don’t know what to do anymore...chirp.”

“I can’t help if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“I’ll keep it short...” Her eyes were dull and exhausted as she spoke. “Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and Makigai Namako-sensei have artist’s block and writer’s block...”

“Oh.”

That single sentence was all I needed to know exactly what was going on.

“Finally time to bring in Aki the Troubleshooter, huh?”

“You’re not allowed to enjoy this, y’hear?”



AKI

AKI

Emergency MTG time.

OZ

OZ

Magic the Gathering?!

AKI

AKI

It stands for meeting.

AKI

AKI

Our team is in trouble, and you wanna sit around playing card games?

OZ

OZ

Good point.

AKI

AKI

So what's going on?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i colored and finished up all the illustrations but something just doesn't feel right.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

don't ask me why.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i just feel like no one's gonna be happy if we release these now.



Makigai Namako

This.



Makigai Namako

I'm stuck on Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's lines myself.



Makigai Namako:

I feel it in my soul that she's a great character, but there's just something missing.

AKI

AKI

Can you tell us exactly what this missing thing is?



Makigai Namako

Hmm...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

it's like the dick inside my heart just won't get hard.



AKI

Mind not saying stuff like that out of the blue?



OZ

I bet she had that line in autocomplete.



Makigai Namako

All the lines I write for her just seem flat. Like there's not enough charm to any of them.



AKI

Can't you use your literary talents to force the quality up?



Makigai Namako

If this were a novel, I could use everything I had to amp up the charm in the writing.



Makigai Namako

I can't do that for a game where text space is limited.



Makigai Namako

I'd have to go back through each line to put in more impact.



OZ

That'll boost engagement too.



Makigai Namako

I saw her backstory and thought, "This'll work."



Makigai Namako

But there's something missing from this Kokuryuun Kugetsu.



AKI

There are two days till the deadline Canary-san set.



OZ

She came up with that out of nowhere, though, so it's not like we have to stick to it, right?



Murasaki Shiku-sensei

WHOO!



Makigai Namako

Nice one, OZ.



AKI

Might as well stick to it if we can. It'll make the later stages easier.



Murasaki Shiku-sensei

BOO!



Makigai Namako

Bad take, AKI.



AKI

Come on, guys.



AKI

I've got a back-up plan just for this kind of situation.



Murasaki Shiku-sensei

oohh



Makigai Namako

What sort of plan?



AKI

First up, can you all join me in the living room?



AKI

You can speak over LIME, Makigai-sensei.



Makigai Namako

Got it.



OZ

Wonder what we're about to see.



AKI

Well, for starters...



AKI

We're all gonna watch some anime.

Chapter 10: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for the 05th Floor Alliance!

That evening, we gathered in front of the eighty-inch 4K television in the living room of Villa Kanaria. It was three days until—wait, it was past midnight, so make that two—Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's deadline. When I say "we," I mean me, Iroha, Sumire, Ozu, and finally Canary, who was curled up in embarrassment on the very end of the couch.

Mashiro wasn't here as she still had the corrections on her manuscript to work on, so she was holing herself up in her room. Instead (okay, that sounds a bit rude, but still), we had Makigai Namako waiting on the other side of a LIME call.

We were gathered like we were waiting for a great detective to show up and tell us who committed the heinous murder in this villa and why, but the truth was there was no murder, and what we *were* here for wasn't nearly that big a deal.

"Let's watch some anime. You got Netflimax here?"

"Huh? Well, sure, chirp..." Canary replied glumly, depressed from the fact that she wasn't able to pull her writer and artist out of their slump. The "chirp" at the end was her keeping things professional, of course. Maybe.

"You got a TV there, Makigai-sensei?" I asked.

"Uh... No, I'm on vacation."

"Huh? You were writing the new scenario while on vacation?"

"N-No! Um, er... Right! I came out here to celebrate meeting my deadline, but then you guys showed up with more work for me!"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. We really messed up with the timing there, huh?"

"And why is my editor managing this whole thing? I just don't get it!"

I didn't know how to answer his question, but I could see why this situation must've seemed crazy from his perspective.

"Anyway, I've got another phone, so I'll watch on that. I dunno what your plan is, but I'll come along for the ride."

"Great. Think you can get *My Honey*, episode one?"

"My Honey? Oh yeah, that anime that was out in spring."

Yup. It was the anime the Alliance had looked forward to each week. It had started airing right around the time Mashiro transferred to our school.

"Aki, I still don't get what this is all about. We escapin' reality by

watching anime or something?”

“Wait, is that what we’re doing?! You mean we’re forgetting the deadline and I get to drown in Mio-chan’s gorgeous stomach instead?! Score!”

“Shikibu.”

“Apologies. Wait, why *are* we doing this then? You’re the one who said we were gonna watch anime in the first place, Aki! Why’re you getting mad at *me* now?!”

“Don’t worry, Sumire-chan-sensei! It’s all part of Senpai’s awesome secret plan!”

“Secret plan?”

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s nothing bad. I mean, you get to watch anime, right?”

Ozu snickered. “Sounds like things are getting interesting!”

“I’m all ears.”

At least I had Ozu and Makigai Namako-sensei on board to start with.

“Okay, well...”

I paused as I noticed everyone’s eyes on me. They were holding their breath in anticipation, just waiting for me to continue. It was like they were valuing me and what I was doing for them. That such a small thing sent a wave of relief washing over me did make me feel pretty pathetic, though.

But I couldn’t change who I was. The only weapons I had to fight with were the ones I’d been given, and I felt like I’d come to terms with that now.

“This is it! The opening ceremony of the *My Honey* marathon! The flame is burning, so let’s get started!” I announced.

There was a pause.

“You dumb or something, Aki?”

“Makigai-sensei... I’m not against criticism, but if you could be...maybe a little more constructive?”

“I’m just saying. The deadline’s in two days.”

“Pffft, yeah. This doesn’t seem like a great time to be watching anime. Well, I mean, that’d be the *normal* way of looking at things, right?” Ozu grinned, like he knew exactly what was going on in my head.

“Whoa, Senpai. Talk about crazy.”

“Slow and steady wins the race! It’s not like you guys are gonna make any progress when you’re stuck at your desks and hitting your heads against the wall. Watching a good anime is gonna be a more efficient way to spend your time, right?”

“Ha ha! Very logical, Senpai, but that’s a pretty weird strategy to be picking so close to the deadline. Weird, but entertaining. Just like

you!”

“Since you’re here, you might as well enjoy it along with everyone else,” I said.

“Oh...” Iroha’s eyes widened and the grin suddenly dropped from her face. “Okay then!”

Looks like she’s figured it out.

Iroha’s grin was replaced by a bright smile that warmed my heart. This was the first time the entire Alliance had watched anime together like this.

“Maaan, I haven’t watched this since it aired! Oh, but *The Dumbbells the Quintuplets Next Door Lift Saga* is a good anime too. The one that’s airing right now. It doesn’t have anyone nearly as cute as Mio-tan, though, and it’s only *My Honey* that’s got any shippable shotas.”

“Shikibu.”

“Apologies.”

“No...” I shot her a devilish grin. For some reason, the second I called her name, Sumire had flung herself to the floor in front of me, a grim look on her face.

She didn’t need to hold back. Her usual horsing around right before a deadline was worth the death penalty several times over, but today was different. Today, she had her producer’s approval.

“You’re fine. Make sure you enjoy this to the fullest.”

“WAAAH! I LOVE YOU, AKITERU-SAMA!”

Thus began the Alliance’s (plus Canary’s) six-hour *My Honey* marathon.

“The suspense in episode three is just too good! Even when you know Tomomi’s gonna die, I still cry every time. The set-up and everything is just so perfect.”

“Yeah, this part is just incredible! I remember I drew so many comics with Tomomi just so she could be happy in a world where she didn’t die.”

“The CG they used for the bad guys was so good you barely even noticed it too. Tomomi’s beautiful death wouldn’t have been nearly as good without it.”

“Wow, Ozu. You’re heartless.”

“Yeah!”

“No, he’s right. It was masterful how the CG lowered production costs but made the whole scene look even better.”

“Wow, Aki. You’re heartless.”

“Ugh! This is what’s wrong with men! Only us maidens have the sensitive hearts required to appreciate such things!”

“H-Hey, Shikibu!”

“Huh? Oh! Aaaargh!”

“Cool it with the sexism, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Makigai-sensei’s a guy too, you know. It’s got nothing to do with gender.”

“Oh, hey, you’re totally right! Boy, can I be an airhead or what?!”

We used to hold these watch parties over LIME, and now we were doing it in real life. We’d pick an anime that appealed to everyone as much as possible, rave about our thoughts, and sometimes get into little arguments when those thoughts clashed. We were all watching through different eyes, after all.

Those fragments of opinion would all come together to build up and up until we had ourselves a slipshod haven of art appreciation that we could all be somewhat happy with.

Besides it being in real life this time, there was also something—or someone—else that made this different from our usual LIME parties.

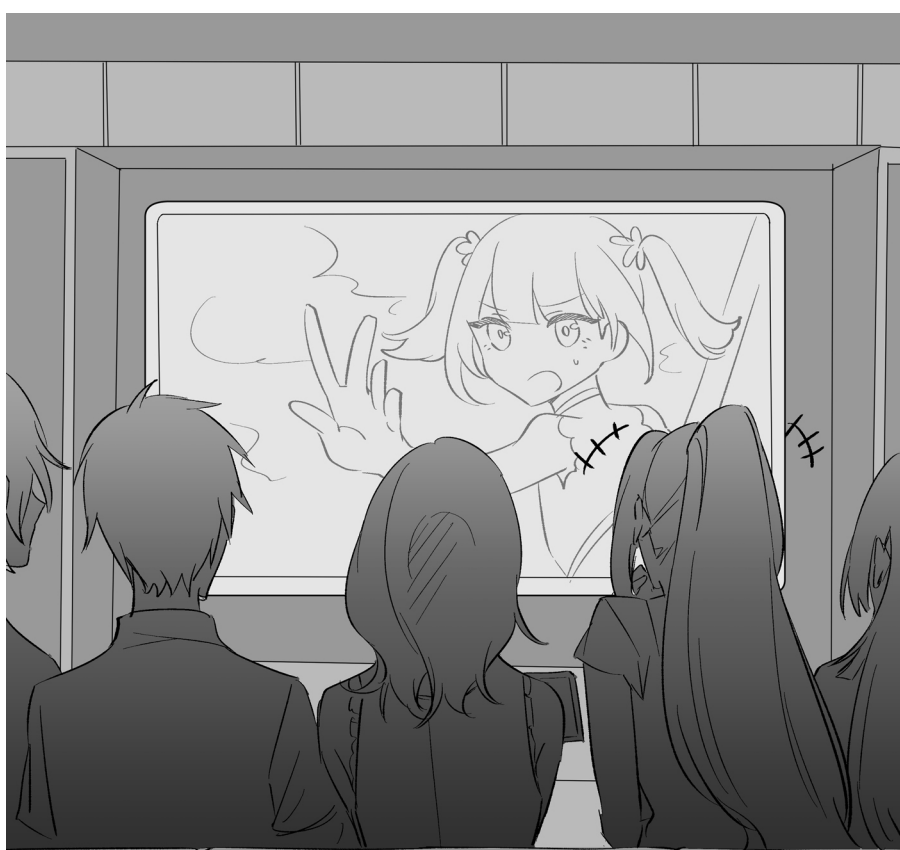
“The best part about Mio-chan is how she’s always going after the protagonist, even if he’s so dense he doesn’t notice it! I mean, it’s so obvious, but he’s completely oblivious, so she has to go even more ham! It’s adorable!”

“Right?! I know *just* what you mean, Iroha-chan!”

“*Yeah. You’ve got good taste.*”

“Heh heh! You guys are exagger— Hey, you stink of booze! How long’ve you been drinking that vodka, Sumire-chan-sensei?!”

“Watching anime sober is a crime! I’m just enjoying myself to the fullest, like Aki told me to!”



Iroha was here. That made it different to our usual watch parties. She mixed in with everyone so well, it was like she'd been a member of the Alliance's LIME group right from the start. Of course, she'd always been involved in our group up on the fifth floor of our apartment building. She never missed one of our parties. I was sure that Ozu, Sumire, and Makigai Namako-sensei all considered her one of us.

But this was different. We were having this watch party right now to help two of our Alliance members get over their blocks. The other times we watched anime like this, all the discussion was done in the LIME group. All Iroha could do was look over my shoulder at my phone to see what was being said. The sight in front of me now was like a battered sandcastle finally being brought to full glory by its once-missing piece.

The marathon and our discussion of *My Honey*'s story and characters continued. Suddenly, everybody fell quiet and frowned in unison. It was past the five-hour mark, and the anime had run into its second half. Most notable was the silence from Sumire and Makigai Namako-sensei, who had been excitedly chattering away most of the night.

This is it.

I glanced at Iroha. Our eyes met and she winked back at me. She knew exactly what was going on in my mind.

"It looks like you've all noticed it." I paused the stream and walked out in front of everyone. It was like I was the detective now, standing in front of my row of suspects. "*My Honey*. Episode ten. This is the key."

"What's goin' on, Aki?"

"All of us have had different thoughts and reactions to this anime's story and Mio's character so far. But there was one moment in this episode where we were all thinking the exact same thing."

Mio, *My Honey*'s main heroine, was depicted as the powerful female type throughout. While having a strong partnership with the male lead, she didn't hesitate to criticize him, and kept herself closed off as she traversed the tricky tightrope between her duties and her romantic feelings.

Episode ten was where we reached the endgame, and Mio finally fell in love with the protagonist properly. She started being overly clingy with him, so much so that it was annoying.

"It was at that moment that you three: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, Makigai Namako-sensei, and even Ozu, agreed that she was at her absolute cutest."

It was the one moment our opinions aligned. A shared crossing between our otherwise parallel roads. If there was one thing I could do for the Alliance that nobody else could, it was this: Find the point where everybody came together. Find that single jewel shining in the desert, and lead them there.

“If we want to make our new character, Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, the best she possibly can be...”

Iroha stepped forward before I finished my sentence. Ozu, Sumire, Makigai Namako-sensei on the other side of the phone, and even Canary in the corner watched on in silence as Iroha placed a hand to her chest and took a deep, deep breath.

“Why not make her like this?”

It was like her eyes changed color. Like that face wasn’t Iroha’s anymore, but somebody else’s. It was a sign that the switch had flicked inside her. This was Kohinata Iroha, the actress. The girl who only revealed herself in Otoi-san’s studio.

“I wish to be with you until the end’s appointed time, when the moon appears in the night sky. I wish to capture this moment with my master in a single image and hold it close to me for all eternity. Or is this wish of mine a selfish one?”

Iroha’s—Kokuryuuin Kugetsu’s voice was wistful as it dissolved into the air. Her narrowed eyes were pleading yet fearful, as though she could see the worst possible outcome right before her. Everybody had half-risen to their feet, as though worried they’d regret it if they didn’t reach out for her. That was the gravitational power of Iroha’s eyes. But the next second, she was grinning.

“Just kidding!” She laughed. “My, how feeble the expression which adorns your faces. Might you be anticipating a midnight rendezvous avec moi? How terribly sweet!”

The tension broke at once. Kokuryuuin Kugetsu was prodding a devilish finger into my cheek like we were old friends.

Her tone, her movements, her manner... Every visible aspect came together to create a very real, lifelike haughtiness reminiscent of a vampire who had been alive for years upon years. Yet everything else came from that annoying girl I knew all too well from my daily interactions with her.

Personality-wise, she was a slightly different Kokuryuuin Kugetsu from the original. That new element didn’t destroy her character. It added just the right amount of spice to make it better.

“W-Wow!” Sumire was leaning forward, her eyes sparkling.

“*This is...good...*” Makigai Namako-sensei gasped in wonder through the phone.

“Now I get it.” Ozu held one hand to his chin as he looked at me with a meaningful gaze that told me everything had clicked.

Our intentions should have been clear to everybody now. I placed a confident hand on Iroha's shoulder.

"That was some great acting. Thanks, Iroha."

She giggled. "She's a fun character to play! It's just coming up with her lines that's tough!"

With that, Iroha was no longer a majestic vampire, but her usual, teenage self. Sumire and Ozu looked utterly astonished at the change, but right now I didn't feel like going into detail and explaining things to them. Everybody already knew Iroha had some level of acting talent since we helped out the drama club, though we didn't go so far as to tell them that Iroha was also the actress lending her voice to every single *Koyagi* character.

They had no way of picking up on the full range of her talent from that episode alone, and I never revealed how many voice actors were working on *Koyagi*, so I doubted it had even crossed their minds that it was just the one actor doing the entire range of roles.

That was why we judged that we could get away with her performance just now without Iroha's cover being blown. There was, of course, a reason we were willing to take the risk.

"Well? This is the Kokuryuuin Kugetsu you guys—no, *we*—wanted to see, right?"

That reason was to show her off to Sumire and Makigai Namako-sensei and give them a push towards the finishing touches. To ever so slightly clarify the blurred image of the ideal Kokuryuuin Kugetsu they had in their heads.

"Yes! Yes, this is her! This is just the Kugetsu-tan I wanted!"

"She's arrogant and high-minded, but sweet and girly underneath. I always thought there was something missing from that description. But if you add in that slight domineering way of showing affection... We've got a really strong character on our hands here."

"We do," Ozu agreed. "Having her be beautiful and a little cringe doesn't add much to her compared to our other characters. But making her *annoying*... I think we've just found perfection."

"All righty! Time to add the finishing touches to Kugetsu-tan!"

"Yeah. It's been a while since I've had motivation to write like this."

"Or maybe not! We've only got two episodes of the anime left, so let's keep watching!"

"You really don't have any discipline, do you? I mean, I'm gonna watch too, but still..."

"Aki." Ozu shot me a quiet, mischievous grin. "You didn't decide this new angle was cute only after hearin' the Alliance's consensus, did you?"

"Nope. I knew *you* wouldn't let that slide, of all people."

"My Honey, episode ten. Didn't you say you hated the way Mio

acted in that episode, while we all liked it? You said you couldn't possibly like it, 'cause it reminded you too much of a certain someone."

"Yeah. I did."

"Am I okay to get my hopes up about your sudden change of heart?" His eyes were searching as he looked at me.

Ozu was definitely getting his hopes too high, but I felt like launching into a long-winded explanation of why would only make things worse.

"All the Alliance members are in agreement on this matter. It's nothing more and nothing less than that."

That was the answer I decided on.

I turned back to the distinguished member of our team who had dealt the finishing blow in raising our creators' motivation. When our eyes met, she grinned and puffed out her chest proudly. I gave her a thumbs up to commend her for a job well done.

Iroha laughed gleefully and shot me a cheerful peace sign in response.

"Mind telling me what the big idea is?"

"What big idea?"

"Letting everyone slack off so close to the deadline. It's not normal."

"No, it's not."

We'd all seen the exciting final episode of *My Honey* through to the end a little while ago. I had moved to the kitchen section of the living room to have a coffee and was midway through drinking it when a frowning Canary showed up.

I smiled at her, almost apologetically. "Those guys *aren't* normal, are they? It's like they barely fit together."

"I can't tell if they like each other or hate each other's guts."

"Right. I know just what you mean."

The most efficient way to manage a team should be to make sure their ideals are aligned, give them an objective, and have them work hard towards it. If you introduce some new guy to the group, and he's got different values, then you'll be putting so much effort into working through his inevitable complaints about everything, that not only will your team's progress grind to a halt...but your leadership would also be undermined. Sorry to the new guy, but the best thing to do would be to kick him out and set off on an epic quest to find someone who *would* fit in.

None of this applied to the 05th Floor Alliance.

"We're all completely incompatible with each other. Yet somehow

it just works, like a black box. That's who we are."

"You're saying you don't know the inner workings of your group?"

"Yeah. I don't know how it works, it just does. It's probably because, like you've seen, we watch the same anime and play the same games as each other day after day, and we aren't afraid to share our dissenting opinions. Where we are now is a culmination of all of that, I guess."

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's laziness and Makigai Namako-sensei's LIME-only participation. All of that comes together to get you results too?"

"I can't say for sure, but probably."

When Canary took away her anime, manga, games, and other entertainment, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had been able to focus on her illustrations. Canary fully understood human desire and where it all came from, and through her guidance, Makigai Namako-sensei was able to put together an incredible scenario.

It wasn't enough to bring the project to completion, and it wasn't enough to shape it into the perfect update for *Koyagi: When They Cry*. There was one vital ingredient missing: the unique and indescribable brand of fun that the *05th Floor Alliance* had cultivated and shared in together.

"At this stage, there's not much I can offer the Alliance. But that invisible *something* that's there, that something that we created together... It could never be the same without me. Because I'm an Alliance member too."

"I see. You found your answer." Canary leaned back against the sink, took a sip from her wine glass, and held it in her mouth as a smile that smacked of maturity spread across her lips. She lowered her gaze down to the red liquid as it swirled around gently in the glass.

I turned to her and bowed my head. "Thank you."

"I don't want to be thanked, chirp. I lost. Pretty pathetically too."

"You never wanted to win, though, did you? You only started this contest to make me realize what I needed to realize."

Canary didn't reply.

Even if I was wrong, there was one thing I was sure of now. If she wanted to poach my staff from me, there were countless, more efficient ways to crush me. Ways which didn't involve giving herself a ridiculous, one-week deadline under the guise of not wanting to sap away our summer vacation time. It was clear she didn't have any ill intentions the moment that deadline was set.

"You told me to think about what I could offer the Alliance. Thanks to you, I was able to reconsider and identify what made us, us."

"You still need to keep your guard up."

“I know. There’s no point just shrugging my shoulders and continuing on as always, just ’cause I have an answer.”

This wasn’t math either. There wasn’t just going to be a single answer. This was a question I had to consider constantly as long as I was leading the Alliance.

Canary let out a tired laugh. “You’re a clever goose. I guess there’s nothing left for me to say, if you’ve already worked things out that far.”

I could tell from her face just how hard she’d pushed herself over the past week to make the deadline.

“But why did you do all this? Why did you want to help me grow?”

“Eh. I didn’t really do it for you.” She smiled as if trying to remind me that she wasn’t that much of a kind-hearted person. “I stuck my beak in for Makigai-sensei’s sake. And for my own sake.”

“You mean...”

“Makigai-sensei’s novels are secondary to him; one half of his heart is completely dedicated to the Alliance. If I helped to make that group stronger, it’d improve his branding, chirp.”

“Right now, we’re the ones relying on his success at UZA Bunko to make us look better. I’ve always thought I wanted to pay you back one day.”

“You could’ve paid me back by not monopolizing Makigai-sensei’s time in the first place, chirp.”

“I guess you’re not exactly wrong there.”

I was taken aback by the slight sharpness in her tone, but the next second she was smiling at me again; she probably hadn’t meant it.

“Don’t get your feathers in a twist over it. Makigai-sensei’s working with you because he wants to.”

“I’m glad to hear it—and grateful.”

“Mind doing me a favor, if you really are that grateful?”

“A favor? I mean sure, if it’s something I’m capable of...”

“So you’ll do *anything*, right?”

“No, I didn’t say that,” I replied, being sure to keep an unimpressed look on my face.

I knew she was joking, especially since she didn’t push it, but my gut told me that making an absolute promise like that to an editor like her wasn’t a smart move.

Canary pulled out a thin card from her pocket. It was just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She held it between her fingers and planted a kiss on the corner before handing it to me.

“Wanna become my manservant?”

“Excuse me?”

“Watching you and your Alliance come together solidified an idea

I've had about you since I first saw you, chirp. If you joined UZA Bunko and worked your tail feathers off together with me then...give it ten years, and we'd be able to totally crush Imperial Books."

The card she was handing out to me was a business card belonging to an UZA Bunko employee. The name on it read Hoshino Kana.

"Kiraboshi Kanaria, seventeen. Real name Hoshino Kana. I only give this card out to people who deserve it. So what do you say?"

I searched Canary's eyes, but there wasn't even a glimmer of amusement in them. She was being serious.

Objectively speaking, this was an incredible opportunity. While not at the level of Imperial Books, this was still an up-and-coming publishing house affiliated with the hit author, Makigai Namako. The woman offering me this opportunity was that publishing house's ace editor who, on an individual level, had achieved extraordinary things. Anyone with their eyes set on the industry would be champing at the bit for a chance like this.

Canary had an impressive history behind her. She should have already known my response, so it was strange that she was asking in the first place.

"I'm very grateful, but..."

My mind was already made up, and my answer was simple. But Canary didn't let me finish.

"I already know. Your priorities lie with the Alliance, chirp."

"Then why ask me in the first place?"

"Just in case. In case something happens in the future, something unavoidable which splits up the Alliance. That's when you should call the number on the card."

"So you're saying it's okay to keep this as backup, right?"

"I guess that's what I'm saying, chirp. Say I'm jinxing you if you want, but you never know what's around the corner in this world."

"Yeah, this kind of stuff is important. If you're serious about this, then it's a real help."

If the Alliance failed, that was it. With this, my fears were eased a little. With this, I knew that if we stumbled, there was someone there to give us a hand.

"I gotta say, it makes me feel more like a little bug than a pretty canary to be considered a backup option, but I guess that's the price you pay for love."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"Aha ha ha! Don't worry; I'm an idol, so we can't be together anyway."

"Mind not picking on me?" I sighed.

The woman (though she looked like a girl) laughed and drank

more of her wine. I ignored her ramblings and turned my attention back to my team still having fun in the sitting area.

I knew how rare it was to be standing next to an accomplished industry star like Canary, and even rarer was the fact that she'd recognized me. It would have never happened if I had been alone; I was determined never to forget just how much I owed my fellow Alliance members.

"I'm going back." Taking some tomato juice from the fridge, I turned my back to Canary and took a step towards the sitting area.

"Off you go, 05th Floor Alliance Member Aki-kun."

"See you. Thanks for everything, Hoshino-senpai."

I didn't want to keep up the excessive boundaries anymore. I wasn't like Canary; I wasn't an adult who had to keep a professional distance between me and my team. The Alliance may have been inexperienced and had a hard time finding solid ground—but I was one of them.

Epilogue 1: What I Need to Do Next

“The new character is ready! We’ve got her illustrations, her scenario, and her coding all set. Now, I would like to—”

“Blah blah blah! Come on, let’s all get in the water!”

“H-Hey, Murasaki! At least let me finish!”

“Why? This is the first time in ages I haven’t had any deadlines! W-Wait, Iroha-chan! You’re in a bikini today?! Oh my God! *Oh my God!*”

“Aha ha ha! You’re such a virgin, Sumire-chan-sensei! My sides are gonna split!”

“Ew. And you’re getting too brave, Iroha-chan. T-Take this!”

“Eek! Stop splashing water on me, Mashiro-senpai, I— Eeeee!”

“Aaand they’re already in the water.” I sighed. “How do they move so fast when they barely exercise?”

It had been two—no, three days since we watched *My Honey* together. Once we were done, Sumire and Makigai Namako-sensei had gone straight to work and finished up their work on our new character without a single break. Mashiro finished the corrections on her manuscript at around the same time, and was finally able to get out of that workroom that trapped her like a clamshell. We were totally exhausted by the time the work was done and the deadline came around, and we lost about half a day after that to a state of unconsciousness.

Three days later (today), we’d totally recovered, and were making the most of the beach we still had access to until our imminent journey home. As the team leader, I was hoping to wrap things up with a little speech, but the girls had ignored me and ran off to play, leaving just Ozu and me behind on the sand.

It was whatever. There was nothing more inefficient than a leader’s address anyway. They were having plenty of fun already without the excitement my words might bring, so I decided it wasn’t necessary.

“Nice work this week, Aki.” Ozu sat down next to me in the sand.

“You too.” There was no difference from usual in his handsome features, save from the tiny shadows of exhaustion under his eyes that only I recognized. “Must’ve been tough, suddenly having to implement all this programming for the new character.”

“Yeah. But I enjoyed it, ’cause I knew the character was gonna be

a good one.”

“That’s the main thing.” I sat down next to him.

Out in front was Iroha, relaxing and floating around on an inner tube; our resident ocean-lover Mashiro, swimming around excitedly with a joy I’d never seen from her before; and Sumire, drowning. It was just another day in the life of the Alliance.

“You sure took the long way round this time, Aki. I gotta say, it was kinda inefficient.”

“What d’you mean?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

Ozu chuckled. I should have known my best friend was the one person I couldn’t fool.

“If your only goal was to help make Kokuryuuin Kugetsu into the kind of character Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and Makigai Namako-sensei would like, all you needed to do was show them Iroha acting as her for a bit. You had that skit ready from the start too, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. You’re pretty sharp, huh?”

Ozu had hit the nail on the head. Iroha and I had been working on that while everyone else was busy on the new character. We were doing what we could; thinking about who Kokuryuuin Kugetsu would be if we were creating her. The result was the Kokuryuuin Kugetsu Iroha performed in front of everyone.

If there was going to be a stumbling block in her development, it was going to come up the second our illustrator and writer felt that Kokuryuuin Kugetsu lacked charm. Once Iroha and I had talked things over and come to that conclusion, we started work on our plan.

“Why did you make us do something as inefficient as sitting through the entirety of *My Honey*?”

“I guess I can tell you, since you figured out most of it already. I’m not gonna tell the others, though.” I prepared to lay bare my reasoning. It wasn’t exactly noble, so I was reluctant to say anything, but I also felt bad hiding stuff from my best friend.

“The truth is,” I began, “I just thought it’d be easier to convince them if it was late at night and they were super hyped.”

“Ouch.”

“Trying to reason normally with creative people facing a block is never gonna work. So I caught them when they were totally engrossed by the anime, and hit them with our idea of a charming Kokuryuuin Kugetsu. Since they were hyped anyway, I figured that’d turn straight into motivation.”

“And here I was, expecting you to hit me with something groundbreaking.” Ozu’s face slumped with disappointment.

“Sorry, but my methods aren’t noble, and they definitely aren’t perfect.”

Iroha had pointed out that I was an Alliance member too, and that

made me feel like I could value myself a little more. At the same time, it was important to remember the truth: that I was far from as talented as the people surrounding me.

"I figured that the idea Iroha and I came up with would give us some solid results. But I also thought I needed to do everything humanly possible to make sure it would go well. Maybe it was kinda dirty to target them at a time they weren't at their sharpest, but that was a method available to me, and so I used it."

"Aki..."

"If that's enough to make you hate me, you don't have to be my friend anymore."

"This again? Aki, I already knew you were like this from the very start." Ozu shook his head at my usual self-critical rhetoric.

He always accepted me with a smile no matter what I did. Maybe he was just being nice, but it was because Ozu was that kind of guy that I could continue down my chosen path with confidence.

"Oh, there was somethin' I picked up on from Iroha's performance." Ozu shaped his fingers into a ring and spied through it to watch our three companions playing in the water. Actually, I got the impression he was just looking at the one: his sister, Iroha. "Iroha's been doing the voices for *Koyagi*, hasn't she?"

"Guess there's no point hiding it anymore." I gave my resigned response.

Once Ozu knew, there was a risk it might get out somehow to their mom, Otoha. I trusted Ozu not to tell her, of course, but I kept the truth from him precisely because I didn't want to find myself doubting him if it *did* come out. But it didn't look like I'd be able to hide that truth from him any longer.

"I always thought, since Iroha's always sneakin' into your room and coming to our parties, it made sense she knew all this stuff about the Alliance. But seeing her perform the new character made me realize she knows more about *Koyagi* and its context than she should have learned from all of that."

"Never thought I'd hear you talking about 'context.'"

"That's all thanks to you. Communication isn't really a problem for me. Well, when it comes to *Koyagi* at least."

Ozu really was sharp. Iroha was the owner of an incredible voice capable of expertly transforming itself to fit any character and their personality; male or female, young or old. Yet every voice in *Koyagi* had a certain feel to it that seemed entrenched in the performance. Maybe it was something in the way Iroha performed, like a particular way of breathing, or maybe it was something imperceptible borne from the Alliance's work on the scenario, the art, and everything else as a whole. Whatever it was, it was there.

That was what made Koyagi special. That was why it had so many fans, even in the oversaturated market we were in.

“Iroha looked like she was having a ton of fun performing.”

“Yeah. Just, don’t tell Otoha-san,” I pleaded earnestly.

“I know. Of course I won’t. I’m on you guys’ side, y’know.” Ozu smiled and nodded at me.

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

In front of us, Sumire and Mashiro were splashing each other with water in the shoals. Iroha crept up behind Mashiro and started tickling her sides, and the two of them started grappling with each other while Mashiro squirmed.

“She really is talented, and I’m not just sayin’ that because I’m her brother. You want her to show her talents to the world, don’t you? That’s why you’ve been supporting her all this time, even though she’s been annoying you.”

“Yeah. Keeping her talent hidden would be a loss to society. Her voice acting skills really charmed me.”

“Right. Charmed you *platonically*? I thought it was her feminine charm that got you, and that was why you looked out for her.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that her attitude gets on my nerves?”

“I thought you secretly thought it was cute and that you were just being tsundere. But if your entire relationship with Iroha is because you recognized her talent, then maybe I’ve been barkin’ up the wrong tree this whole time.”

“Yeah... Maybe you were. Or maybe not.”

“Maybe not?” Ozu frowned, as if trying to pick out the meaning of my words.

Why did my best friend’s brain have to work so quickly? It was even terrifying sometimes. But terrifying or not, I decided to tell him about my recent realizations regarding Iroha.

“Iroha is annoying, but...that annoyingness could be a part of what makes her cute.” I barely managed to make the admission, scratching at my cheek and averting my gaze in the process. I couldn’t look Ozu in the eye, and nor could I look towards Iroha playing in the sea.

“Whoa! You finally admitted it, Aki!” Ozu leaned forward excitedly.

Getting me and Iroha together seemed to be his life’s mission, so what I said had probably sparked some hope in him. But I had to set him straight.

“Don’t get me wrong. Yeah, I think Iroha’s annoying and cute, but that doesn’t mean I have romantic feelings for her.”

“C’mon, you can’t fool me this late in the game. You’ve come this

far, why not be a man and admit it already?"

"I mean it. I'm not just making up some excuse."

Ever since the night we were made to go through the Ceremony of Knots, I'd noticed my heart rate going up whenever Iroha was around. I did consider whether that might be the result of a crush. But when I took a step back and looked at things calmly, then those reactions were only natural. I was a teenage boy, and she was a cute girl. It wasn't a crush; it was a simple physiological phenomenon.

"Iroha is an attractive girl, but I don't think my feelings towards her are romantic or anything, and at this point I don't want to force myself to believe they are either."

"Because your top priority right now is the Alliance?"

"Yeah. Plus, I've got my promise with Tsukinomori-san. I'm supposed to be Mashiro's fake boyfriend until graduation, and I can't get into a real relationship before then. I want to bring the Alliance to the goalpost first, and then I can take the time to think things through properly."

To me, that was the right thing to do. It was also for Mashiro's sake, and out of respect for the courage she'd shown in confessing to me. And it was for Iroha's sake. I didn't know how she felt about me, but I did know I was grateful for her kindness and her presence.

This was what I needed to do, before I could search myself for how I really felt, and before I could face those feelings head-on.

"Looks like I'm gonna be wingmannin' for a lot longer," Ozu sighed with a shrug.

"No, you really don't have to do anything." I turned my attention back to Iroha playing in the water.

Iroha. Sumire. Mashiro. Thanks to our plan, even Makigai Namako-sensei had now recognized Iroha and her talent. Back when we were in middle school, I could remember seeing her in the Kohinata living room looking bored stiff, but there she was now, her face bright as she played with the others. That face was totally different from her honor student persona who always kept a certain distance from everybody.

She used to show her annoying side to nobody but me. Now she was showing it in front of Mashiro and Sumire too. And I found that annoying side surprisingly cute.

That was why I wanted the whole world to accept her, for who she was when she was enjoying herself to the fullest like this. I wanted them to accept Iroha when she was both annoying and cute. I wanted to shout out, to make them see that annoying girls *could* be cute. That Iroha was at her cutest when she was just being herself. I could feel my desires as the team's director getting all the more restless.

"We've got the summer festival at the end of the month, right?"

And after that the cultural festival.”

“Yeah. The fall’s packed full of events. Can’t wait.”

“It’s a season all about building bonds with your classmates by setting up for events together. Just another way to celebrate your youth.”

“Heh. I never thought I’d hear you talk about ‘youth.’ But I see what you’re gettin’ at here, since you’ve finally accepted how cute—but annoying—Iroha is.”

“Right. I wanna make good use of those events. Y’know, while we’re still young.”

Ozu probably already knew exactly what I was about to say. Otherwise he wouldn’t be grinning like he was waiting for me to say it. But while we might have seemed totally in sync, there seemed to be one fatal difference between our ways of thinking this time, because when I did open my mouth and declare my idea, he froze in confusion.

Ten seconds later, he shot me a, “Wait, what?”

Ozu might have questioned it, but it was something I wanted to make happen from the bottom of my heart, and it fit right in line with my policy of finding the most efficient way for every Alliance member to achieve happiness.

More than anything else, it was something Iroha needed. Because when Ozu, Mashiro, Otoi-san, Midori, and I graduated, she’d only have Sumire, a teacher, left. As a student, she’d be alone.

“I want to use the cultural festival to find Iroha a best friend in her grade. Someone she can open her heart to, and be a hundred percent annoying with. I want her to find a best friend like you are to me, Ozu.”

Epilogue 2: Meeting with the CEO

My name is Tsukinomori Makoto. I'm just your regular good-looking middle-aged guy. If there's gotta be something setting me apart from your average guy, it's that I'm the CEO of a globally competitive entertainment company called Honeyplace Works.

I settled back against the cushiony-soft headrest of the backseat of my sleek black car and looked out the window. There was the blue, almost transparent ocean, like it had been put together by a master glassblower. Such a gorgeous view, and yet there were barely any cars along this road appreciating it, save for the tacky four-by-four we had passed a few minutes earlier.

I guess if the pretty beach ahead was public instead of in the hands of a single millionaire, my driver wouldn't be enjoying such an easy journey.

That millionaire was Kiraboshi Kanaria, real name Hoshino Kana. I was on my way to her villa right now to discuss a smartphone app they were planning to develop based on one of UZA Bunko's hit works. She was spending the summer vacation at her villa, which was why I was coming all the way out here to see her. My employees all said I didn't have to go all this way since I'm the CEO, but since I was the one deciding where the company's investments went, I wanted to see this through personally. Call it a result of my experience, if you want.

And then there was my secretary, rolling her eyes and guessing that I was only doing this to meet Canary-san, the super-idol-slash-editor. I'd like to note she had no evidence to back up her claim. Yeah, yeah, she had a massive following of male fans, and I thought she looked cute too, but my intentions of hitting on her were zilch. She wasn't my type.

To tell the truth, I'd met her five times already, and never slept with her. We'd never gotten as far as holding hands even. My secretary knows this, and still she didn't trust me? Talk about harsh.

I sent a message to my sugar baby over my dating app of choice.

It was then that the white beach and large villa came into view, and the car pulled up into a spot and parked. I smoothed down my jacket and stepped elegantly out of the vehicle. Not to brag, but good luck finding a more princely gentleman than me.

"Thank you so much for coming all this way to be here, sir.

Everything is all set for our meeting, so if you'd like to follow me..." The sweet lady in the gothic lolita dress dipped her head politely. This was Hoshino Kana, come to meet me.

"How's Mashiro's new book coming along?"

"It's very impressive. A little unconventional perhaps, but that is what her readers expect, so I would say we're looking at a strong piece of work."

"Roger that. I'm glad it's going well." I sat down on the comfy couch in the reception room, inhaling the rich scent of tea along with the good news as I smiled and twiddled my mustache.

Hoshino-san sat down in front of me gracefully, with none of her usual Kiraboshi Kanaria sparkle.

"She has become much more cheerful since changing schools, even more so than when she started working on the scenarios for the 05th Floor Alliance. I suppose she has you to thank for that."

"You know how to flatter a man."

"I am simply telling the truth."

I laughed to deflect some of her modesty, thinking back to what my beloved daughter had been like just a year and a half ago. She never came out of her room and worked non-stop on her novel. Sometimes we would pass each other in the house, and she'd look as though everything about the real world bored her to tears. As her father, it hurt to see. And then one day, I received some interesting news from Hoshino-san.

"Makigai-sensei's received work from an indie dev company called the 05th Floor Alliance. For some reason she seems very excited about it. I've never heard of the company, though, so I'm keeping a careful eye."

Games made out of people's basements always got stuck in the very early stages. It was clearly some kid who had no clue how far he was getting in over his head, reaching out to some new best-selling author. And, as naive as she was about these things, Mashiro had accepted. Those were the simple-minded thoughts I had about the news at the time.

And then what do you know? *Koyagi: When They Cry* actually released and spread like wildfire, thanks to the power of social networks and Makigai Namako's popularity.

"That takes me back. I can still remember thinkin' it was fishy right at the start. Then I found out it was my own nephew running the whole thing! Felt like I'd been stabbed in the back by a foxy minx."

"Are you sure you're not talking about a similar incident occurring around the same time?"

"Ha ha! Ouch! Anyway, I sure was surprised when Akiteru-kun suddenly asked me to hire him and his team."

"I suppose good business sense runs in the family."

“Yeah, but unfortunately my blockhead of a son didn’t inherit any of it. But whatever, that’s not important right now.”

Back then, it felt like a hundred loose threads were all combining into a single point. I spotted Mashiro’s chance to reintegrate herself into society—well, that wasn’t actually my concern. I just wanted my precious girl to enjoy her everyday life like she used to, so I took a chance and handed her over to Akiteru-kun.

“You mentioned running into Akiteru-kun and the gang when Mashiro was working to make her deadline at the inn. They were here just now, weren’t they? With Mashiro.”

“Yes, and I’m afraid I put your nephew to the test a little bit. I hope I didn’t tread on any toes.”

I laughed and took a sip of my tea. “Nah, that sorta thing’ll be good for him. Experience. That’s what counts at his age. Experience of all kinds.”

Hoshino-san let out a deep sigh and clutched her hands to her cheeks. Her gaze was distant as she murmured her next words.

“It must be nice to still be young. Watching him made me want to be a teenager again. Having those two pretty girls all over him... I can’t help but be jealous.”

I spat my tea out so spectacularly that I almost wondered whether I was in a cartoon without realizing it. Luckily, Hoshino-san quickly moved out of the way so none of it hit her, but that was hardly my biggest concern at the moment.

“Two girls? Two? What do you mean, *two*?!”

“Hm? Well, Mashiro-chan and—”

“I know about Mashiro! Mashiro’s fine, as long as he doesn’t go too far and breach our contract!”

Hoshino-san, who didn’t know anything about said contract, tilted her head in confusion. She didn’t realize how serious things were, and how thin the ice Akiteru-kun might have been stepping on was.

“You’re saying there’s another girl that Akiteru-kun is frolicking with?!”

“Yes, that’s right. Kohinata Iroha-chan. Don’t you know her?”

“Kohinata...Iroha...”

Now that I thought of it, Amachi-san did say her girl got on well with Akiteru-kun. Really, he was her son, Ozuma-kun’s friend, so Iroha-chan should have been no more than his friend’s little sister...

“They seem to get on very well indeed. I couldn’t believe how good a match they actually were, taking their personalities into account.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“I’m sorry?”

My arms were trembling like I was experiencing withdrawal from

something, so I pushed my fingers against my temples. I began to shout, like a dictator who'd just been informed the war was beyond winning.

“That’s not what he told me, dammit!”

“Um...” Hoshino-san was scratching at her cheek with an awkward smile, evidently worried she’d said that wrong thing.

I ignored her, instead making a vow to myself. My nephew and his love life needed some serious investigation!

Epilogue 3: The Power of a Dropped Phone

My heart kept thumping. It was so noisy. The feel of him against my shoulder, like we were sharing our body heat, was making my pulse race. I was sleepy from our trip, but with the guy I loved right there, I felt wide awake.

We were on the way home. Sumire-sensei was driving her four-by-four on the road along the coast in what was a safe and steady journey. The sea was as pretty as any painting, but because the beach was private, there were hardly any cars driving past to admire the view, apart from that one sleek black car we passed earlier.

The road was empty, and the car was quiet. I was sitting in the backseat with Aki, and our shoulders were touching. It was a wonderful situation to be in for me, and I just couldn't get my burning cheeks to cool down.

This is based. Thank you, Canary-san...

Canary-san asked Sumire-sensei to take me home with everyone else, because she had an important meeting at her villa today.

But...

"Ngh... Heh heh. Silly Senpai... Mmmngh..."

"Nnngh... Stop... Stay back... Why are you so...annoying? Gnngh... Mmmgh..."

I wasn't the only one sharing in Aki's warmth. Iroha-chan was on his other side, sleeping comfortably with her head on his shoulder. It annoyed me. Aki was *my* boyfriend, and I wished she'd at least try to remember that...even if it was a lie. I pushed my shoulder as firmly against Aki's as I could. *There, better.*

Apart from me, only Kohinata-kun in the passenger seat and Sumire-sensei in the driver's seat were awake. Those two weren't paying attention to what was going on in the back, and the three of us had nothing to do but sit. I wanted to talk more about the Makigai Namako situation with Sumire-sensei, but that would be difficult as long as Kohinata-kun—OZ—was awake. All I could do was sit quietly in the back and let my heart go wild from Aki's warmth. If I had to sit here and feel him, so be it—there was nothing I could do about it.

I was really glad that I plucked up the courage to transfer schools. I don't think I'd have been able to come to the beach with Aki otherwise. I found it really hard to believe that just last year, I hated

going to school. When I thought about how much had changed, it didn't feel real. It was more like a fantastical plot I'd written into one of my novels.

But I knew this wasn't just a dream or a story. Aki's shoulder was too warm for this to be fake. At the same time, there was a pain I was feeling that I never would have experienced if I'd stayed in my old school. It was like a throbbing in my chest that got stronger when I looked at Iroha-chan's sleeping face on Aki's other side.

She was my first female friend, but I knew she was also my love rival. She'd fallen for the same guy I had.

While my brain was frying from my deadlines and the excitement from getting to go to the beach, I had the feeling that Aki and Iroha-chan had gotten a little closer. It was the same feeling I got after they did that ceremony together in Kageishi Village. Had Iroha-chan forgotten I was already Aki's girlfriend?

Or maybe she knew I wasn't *really* his girlfriend. It would make sense; sometimes I forgot to act like we were dating, myself. And once she'd realized that, maybe Iroha-chan had started being more forward, because she thought she had a chance with him.

But that...couldn't be right. Iroha-chan was OZ's little sister. That put a certain distance between her and Aki. I had the advantage; I was an Alliance creator, and I'd be chasing my dreams with Aki to the ends of the earth. With Iroha-chan's acting talents, she could probably become a voice actress, but as long as Aki didn't decide to be her producer too, she wouldn't be joining the Alliance.

I sighed quietly so no one would hear. How could I think something so horrible? How could I hope for Iroha-chan to be cut out from the group? That was why I hated this so much. I just wanted to be her friend, but because I was in love, I also felt horribly guilty. If only she'd fallen for someone else. Then I could get all super excited about shipping and supporting them.

"Mmgh..."

I froze and gasped. Aki was shifting next to me. The timing was so good, I was scared that he could read my thoughts, but he wasn't even waking up. He was just getting more comfortable in his sleep. At that moment, his phone slipped through his fingers.

"He was working right up until he fell asleep... Oh, Aki..." I couldn't help but let out a quiet giggle.

I didn't mean to do it. I just leaned down to pick up his phone, and the screen...I just read what was on it without thinking.

"Huh?" That was all I could think to say.

"Hm? What's wrong, Mashiro-chan?" Sumire-sensei asked from the driver's seat.

"N-Nothing! It's nothing!" I panicked and slipped the phone next

to Aki's butt to try and hide it.

"Sure?" Sumire-sensei asked lightly, returning her focus to her driving.

She didn't seem to suspect anything; I let out a silent sigh of relief—but my relief didn't last for long.

What I had seen on Aki's phone confused me. It was a LIME conversation with a name I recognized: Otoi-san. I knew her from the time Aki helped the drama club; he introduced her as someone who helped the Alliance with their sound production, so it wasn't a shock that he was talking to her.

Now that the new character's scenario, illustrations, and coding were done, the next step was to schedule the recording of her voice lines. I knew that much already too. It was what they were saying in that conversation that confused me.

AKI: So I was hoping we could organize another recording.

Otoi: Payment?

AKI: 30 Suckies... Actually, how about 50, since we're kind of in a hurry?

Otoi: Sure. Guess I'll start packing up to go home.

AKI: Sorry to cut your vacation short.

Otoi: Nah, I like recording with Kohinata. No worries.

AKI: Thank you. I'll let you know what's going on once I've checked Iroha's schedule with her.

Otoi: Sure.

I could almost hear the sound of the puzzle pieces clicking together in my head. The 05th Floor Alliance was made up of its producer, AKI; its programmer, OZ; its illustrator, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei; and its scenario writer, Makigai Namako. Of course there had to be more people working on *Koyagi* outside of these main four, including Otoi-san.

There was also the Phantom Voice Troupe, a group rumored to exist according to social network users. The names of the character voice actors who worked on *Koyagi* were kept secret. There were all sorts of credible series about this troupe. Some said the characters were voiced by several people, because of the variety of voices. Others said they were a group of newbie voice actors. Others still said it was just one veteran voice actor who decided to help out the project and was talented enough to contribute all the voices.

But the truth was obvious. I already knew who this "Phantom Troupe" was. I could still remember how she'd chased those bullies off

using the voice of a terrifying delinquent. How she gave a performance worthy of a professional actress when the drama club was in trouble. How she showed us what kind of character Kokuryuuin Kugetsu should be.

I already had all the clues, and in some ways it was stranger that I hadn't noticed yet. Aki had a talented actor right next to him this entire time. It wasn't just a coincidence.

“Iroha-chan is the Alliance's voice actor...”

Spoken so quietly no one could hear them, those words coalesced into a jet-black raindrop that sank into the depths of my heart.



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Afterword

Hello readers! This is mikawaghost, the author of this fourth volume recounting Akiteru's descent into a sea of endless annoyingness. I put everything I had into it, and I think it came out pretty well.

I was hoping to share another hilarious story with you about something interesting that happened during writing, but things went so smoothly that there's genuinely nothing to speak about, which I kind of felt was a shame when I went to my editor, Nuru-san. I let out a battle cry while thrusting the manuscript over.

I was brimming with confidence that this was the best manuscript I'd ever written for *ImoUza*, like a famous baseball slugger who *knows* he's just hit a home run and immediately starts walking around the bases without checking. That was how I felt while waiting for my editor to get back to me and tell me what a great job I did.

Just as I thought, the praise came back from Nuru-san just a few days later.

"This was good, but why did you use this expression in this super emotional scene here?"

What I just wrote is a masterpiece, thank you very much. There was no way I'd used any weird expressions or metaphors or anything like that. I went to read the offending part straight away.

"She ripped it away from her body like she was tearing the batter off some tempura."

What?

"She ripped it away from her body like she was tearing the batter off some tempura."

What?!

There it was: a sudden tempura-based metaphor that completely ruined the mood. What was that doing there? I only worked it out later; when I was working on that part, I had tempura for dinner. It was from a restaurant which had been there for ages, and it was delicious. The cause of this tragedy was scallop tempura.

In the end, I changed that line to something much cooler: *"She ripped it away from her body, like she was casting off the chains of an invisible curse."* All's well that ends well.

If you ever find yourself writing a book and you go out to have tempura for dinner, make sure you're extra careful that day.

Anyway, now we have volume 4 on sale, and even a drama CD for the special edition! I'm hoping that means the hype around the series will get even bigger as time goes on. Things are about to get even more interesting too, so please keep supporting me!

That's all from me,
mikawaghost

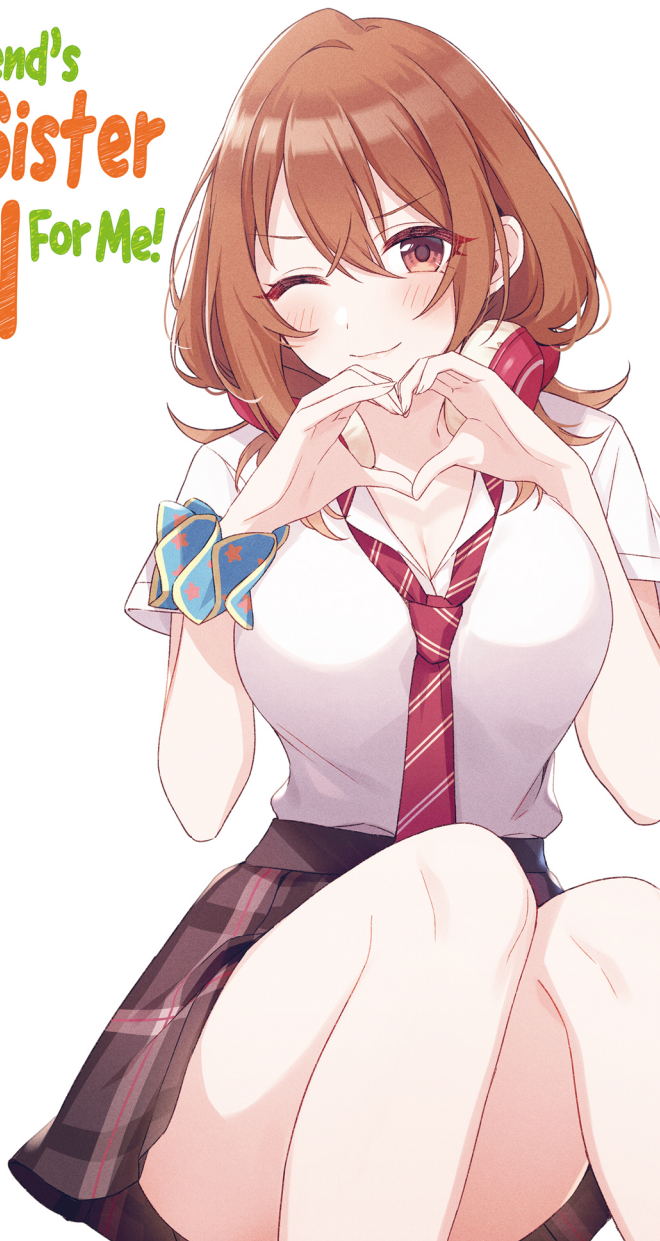
My Friend's
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4
vol. 4

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!?

"SO WHAT YOU'RE
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**"DON'T
MAKE
FUN OF
HER!"**

**SHE'S
THE BEST
TEACHER
I EVER
HAD!"**

**"SUMIRE-SENSEI IS
THE ONLY PERSON...
THE ONLY PERSON
WHO'S EVER REALLY
PROTECTED ME."**



“WE’RE
HERE!”

“HOW COME
YOU LOOK SO
DISAPPOINTED,
SENPAI?”

DON’T
TELL ME YOU
HAD YOUR
HOPES UP!”

“S-SORRY
TO KEEP YOU
WAITING...
AKI!”

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My
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Little
Sister

Has It
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4
vol.

Author:
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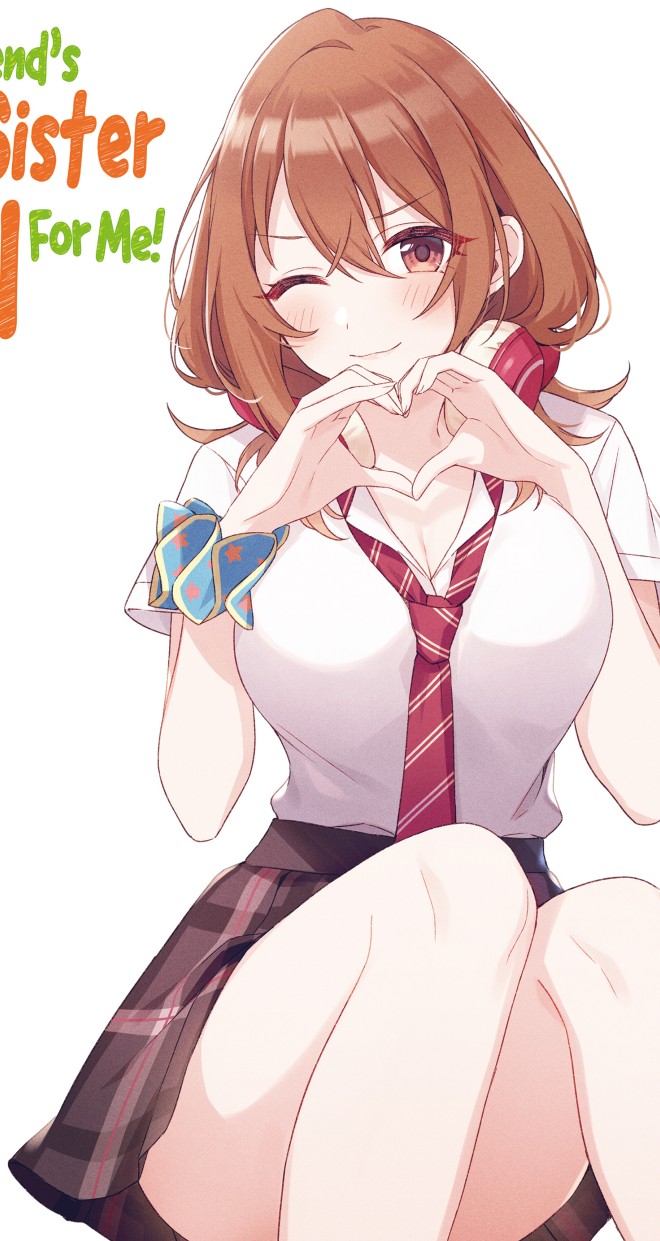
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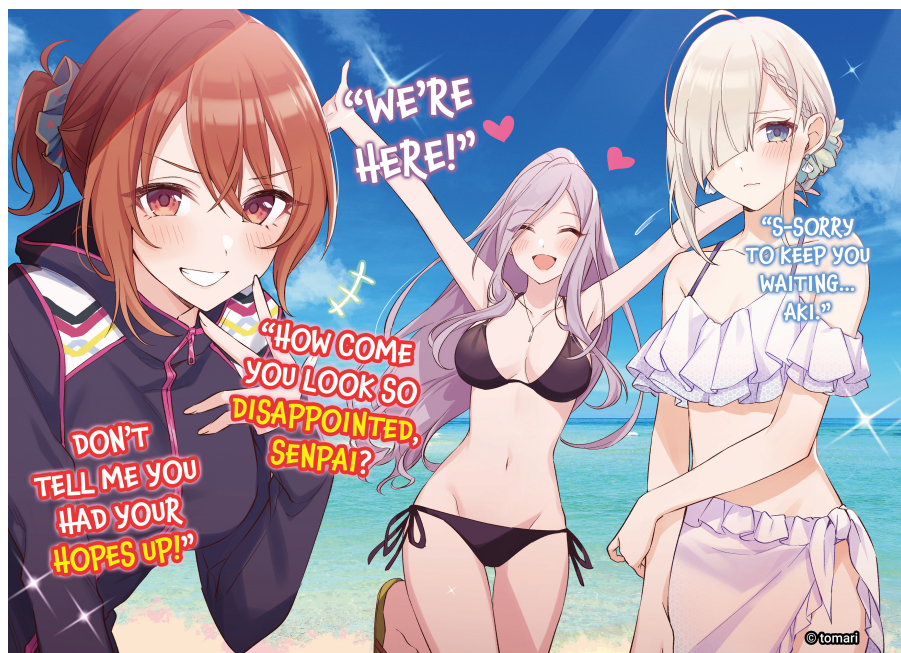


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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 4

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NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 4

by mikawaghost

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